

SATI

5.1 PERSPECTIVE IN HISTORY

The term *sati* means the Hindu practice of widow burning or the burning of the living widow with the corpse of her husband. In Sanskrit, the word *sati* is derived as a feminine noun from *sat*, which means goodness, virtue, truth. The word *sati* thus means a good and virtuous woman, or a true, loyal and dedicated wife. In Sanskrit, '*sati*' being a feminine noun bestows superlative praise on the women as in the expression *Sati Savitri*, or *Sati Parvati*. This was most probably because the marital status of a woman stood out as a predominant phase in her entire life and her relation with her husband was regarded as the most important aspect of her life. However, when the term *sati* is applied to the widow and used in this context, it means a woman who sacrifices herself on her husband's funeral pyre as a token of her love and devotion to her husband.

One hundred and seventy five years after it was abolished by William Bentinck, *sati* continues to be a reality in parts of rural India. While Deorala — where a 19-year-old childless widow Roop Kanwar immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband — remains the most talked-about instance of *sati* in recent times, it was certainly not the last. Janakrani (in her 40s) in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, (2006); Vidyawati, 35, in Fatehpur district of Uttar Pradesh (2006); Kuttu Bai, 65, in Madhya Pradesh's Panna district (2002); Reikia Devi, 65, in Bastipur, Bihar and Sita Devi, 77, in Gaya district of Bihar, have met a similar fate since. For every case that comes to light there are scores of others that go unreported. There are more than 250 *sati* temples in the country with a steady flow of devotees and donations. Clearly, Bentinck's decree and its modern avatar — the Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, have failed to deter people from this "ritualistic suicide/murder".

The sensational *sati* which took place in September 1987, in a village in India's northwestern state of Rajasthan, when an eighteen-year old woman, Roop Kanwar, died in the funeral pyre of her 24 year-old husband, apparently in an act of exemplary devotion to her husband and to a Hindu practice supposedly hallowed by creed and custom. The couple had been married for less than a year. A photograph of the funeral shows a smiling

Roop, bedecked in her wedding outfit and holding on to her husband's body as the flames rise around her. The picture was widely distributed all over Rajasthan to prove the triumphant survival of an ancient tradition- namely, the voluntary choice of self-immolation as the highest wifely duty, one that ensured for the wife the ultimate accolade of *sati*, a wife wholly dedicated to her husband. After Roop's death, which was witnessed by thousands of worshipful supporters, including a large numbers of women chanting Roop's praise, she was virtually deified by those who organized the event. It was, they claimed, an entirely voluntary act and one that reiterated the ancient values of Hindu society and rediscovered the power of spiritual and physical self-sacrifice that, in their view, is at the core of the Hindu religion and elevates it above all others. Soon, however, this view of noble self-sacrifice was questioned. Roop Kanwar was said to have been in a drugged state and the famous photograph a fake. The ecstatic smile the crowd saw on her dying face was suspected to be the rictus of death. Her death took place without the knowledge of her parents, who learnt of it from newspaper reports. Her in-laws were found to be earning enormous sums from worshippers at a shrine erected to Roop on their property, where they had held the funeral instead of at the public cremation site. Most telling of all, local custom would have allowed the widowed Roop to return to her parents' home with the very substantial dowry that she had brought as a bride. Many voices spoke up in defense of *sati* as the most persuasive example of the power and glory that attaches to womanhood in Hinduism.

Following the incident many articles and books appeared, and many conferences addressed the controversial issue of *sati*.¹ Anti-*sati* groups have focused not merely on the cruelty of *sati* as a physical act but even more on the institutionalized subjugation of women implicit in it. Feminist writers in particular have reminded us that revulsion is an obvious human response to *sati*, along with anger and grief, but it must not blind us to other critical questions about India. The sheer inhumanity of *sati* is of such magnitude that we begin to wonder what forces within the Indian polity, armed with what kind of validating pressures, drive human beings, apparently including the subjects of the custom themselves, to accept and even extol *sati*. Since the ancient sacred texts of Hinduism have

¹ To name a few: Ashis Nandy, 'The Sociology of Sati' *Indian Express* (October 5, 1987); Romila Thapar, 'In History', *Seminar* 342 (February 1988); Rajeswari S. Rajan, 'Subject of Sati: Pain and Death in the Contemporary Discourse on Sati,' *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3:2 (1990), Arvind Sharma, Katherine Young etc.

been used both to promote *sati* and oppose it, it becomes necessary to bring forth textual evidence and show how the ideology of *sati* has evolved through time and how it has served personal and social agendas. It would be clear from the examples cited above that the practice of *sati* is still not extinct in India. People still look upon the practice with pride and reverence. *Sati* still has the power to thrill Hindus with reverence and many continue to have sympathy for it.

Traditions in any case often arise out of contemporary needs but seek legitimization from the past. Therefore, the past has to be brought into play where such legitimization is sought. What is of significance today is the attempt to justify a custom at a particular historical juncture, a justification which involves more than merely a custom for it also symbolizes an attitude towards women as well as a view of what is regarded as 'tradition'. It is defended as being a recognized symbol of Hindu values especially those concerning the idealized relationship between husband and wife, the assumption being that it was therefore required in theory of all Hindu women.

Another prevalent view is that it was necessitated by the 'Muslim invasions' when upper caste Hindu women resorted to it to defend their honour from Muslim marauders, a view which was propagated in the nineteenth century. Neither of these is supported by historical evidence. The defence of *sati* is a deliberate attempt at justifying an act for reasons quite other than the preservation of Hindu values and the assumptions which accompany *sati* require investigation.

It is easy enough to take the stand that those who do not accept *sati* as part of the Hindu tradition are westernized Indians deracinated from the mainsprings of the Hindu ethos and therefore unable to understand either the concept of honour or to appreciate the idealized relationship between a Hindu husband and wife, such, that it is sought to be perpetuated to eternity through *sati*; or to see that *sati* is pure act of the ultimate in sacrifice (even if such an act is reduced to a public spectacle with a variety of entrepreneurs literally cashing on it). Such arguments deny a discussion on the subject and the latter is necessary if we are to attempt an understanding of our traditions.

There is no simple explanation for the origin of the custom of burning widows on the pyres of their dead husbands. In prehistoric times there prevailed a belief in several

societies that the life and needs of the dead in the next world are more or less similar to those in this life. It therefore became a pious duty of surviving relations to provide a dead person with all the things that he usually needed when alive. Especially when an important personage like a king, a nobleman or a warrior died, it was felt that his usual paraphernalia should be 'sent with him'.² He would of course require his wives, horses and servants in the next world, and it would therefore be necessary and desirable to kill all these, and burn or bury them with him.

The general prevalence of this custom among the primitive warlike tribes is not difficult to understand. One of the contributory factors behind the prevalence of *sati* could have been the primitive attitude of possessiveness towards women found among the fighting tribes. Fighting races are usually jealous of their women; rather than leave them behind for the risk of going astray they would like them to die.³ There was also the general belief, already referred to, that the warrior will require in his next life all those things that were near and dear to him in this existence. The wife is usually the dearest relation of a man, so she had to be burnt or buried with his remains.

It is said to be a symbol of aristocratic status associated with many early societies such as those of the Greeks and the Scythians. There is however no other society where it was practiced by variant social groups for different reasons at various points of time and where the controversy over whether or not it should be practiced was so clearly articulated over many centuries. Because of this, in India it underwent changes of meaning as well as degrees of acceptance.⁴

The practice of *sati* was not altogether unique to India. There is evidence that the customs in large measures akin to *sati* was practiced in ancient times in Europe, Central and Western Asia and the Far East. Similar custom was prevalent among the heathen Russians on the Volga, the tribes in the Tonga and Fiji islands, the Teutonic tribes, the Thracians in Greece, the Scythians, the Egyptians and the Chinese. But a close scrutiny of the available data demonstrates that this was generally confined to the great ones, the princes and the nobles. From Greece we have instances of Evadne throwing herself in the

². A.S. Altekar- *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1999, p. 115.

³. V.N. Datta - *Sati-Widow Burning in India*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 5.

⁴. Romila Thapar- 'In History', *Seminar*, 342, Feb.1988; p. 84.

funeral pyre of her husband and of the suicide of three Messenian widows mentioned by Pausanias. Sacrifice of widows occurred; it seems as a regular custom, among the Scandinavians, Heruli and Slavians.⁵ If the dead was a man of means and distinction he was also solaced by the sacrifice of his slaves. Further, 'funeral offerings of slaves occurred among the Teutons and the Gauls of Caesar's time, and in the *Iliad* we read of twelve captives being laid on the funeral pyre of Petroclus.'⁶

The system was deep-rooted in China, and in spite of imperial prohibitions, sutteeism of widowed wives and brides continued to flourish in China and met with the same public applause as ever; whilst those widowed wives and brides who lost their lives in preserving their chastity, were entitled both to an honorary gate and to a place in a temple of the state as an object of worship.⁷ In China if a widow killed herself in order to follow her husband to heaven, her corpse was taken out in a great procession.⁸ Custom similar to *sati* was also practiced by the inhabitants of Bali, who constituted the early settlement of the Hindus there, thanks to the Brahminical influence.

Its origin is generally traced to the subordination of women in patriarchal societies. But, in searching for its origins it might be as well to consider other situations which prevailed in India. The notion of bride-price for example, can suggest in some situations the purchase of a woman, the logical termination of which may have been the requirement of her dying together with her husband, although this is not typical of bride-price. Perhaps a more acceptable explanation may relate to societies changing their systems of kinship and inheritance. In some circumstances, the wife would be an alien in the early stages of change. Control over female sexuality would be a further reason. The practice may have originated among societies in flux and become customary among those holding property such as the families of chiefs and *ksatriyas*. Once it was established as a custom associated with the *ksatriyas*, it would continue to be so among those claiming *ksatriya* status as well.⁹

⁵. Westermarck-*A History of Human Marriage*, Vol. I, London, 1921, p. 247.

⁶. cf., Homer's *Iliad*.

⁷. Westermarck, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 242.

⁸. Tawney: *Kathasaritsagara*, Vol.IV, Terminal Essay on Suttee by Penzer.

⁹. Romila Thapar-'In History', *Seminar*, 342, Feb.1988; p. 84.

Another important point worth noting is that from the earliest times, Hindus have regarded fire as the great purifier, and a ritual flame is an integral part of most religious ceremonies. This context makes the correlation between purity and faithfulness an obvious one and explains why fire became the ultimate proving ground for female virtue. Both great epics of India affirm this. *Sati* appears in the *Mahabharata*, where we find that the mother of two of the five Pandava brothers voluntarily chose to die with her husband when she was unable to prevent her husband's death due to his lust for her. She ascended the funeral pyre of her husband and purified herself. Sita, the heroine of *Ramayana*, the other epic, had no need to die as a *sati* but had to prove her purity by going through fire more than once. These mythical examples have worked as powerful models of female virtue that retained their potency irrespective of the numbers of women who died as *satis*, which in actual practice was never large.

Sati was of two types, *sahagamana*, which implied keeping company or dying together, and *anumarana*, which involved dying without the dead body. *Sahagamana* was also known as *sahamarana* or *anvarohana*, wherein the widow ascended the funeral pyre of her husband and was burnt along with his corpse. On the other hand, *anumarana* occurred when the wife, learning of the death of her husband after his cremation, prepared *chita* (funeral pyre) and burnt with her husband's ashes or his *padukas* (sandals), garments, walking stick or with some relic of the deceased, or even without any memento of his, if none were available. We have several instances of *anumarana*, such as the story of Yashomati, the wife of Prabhakaravardhana and mother of Harsha of Kannauja in the *Harshacharita*; the story of Rajyasri, the sister of Harsha, and several other such stories.

The origin of *sati* is lost in the mist of antiquity. Facts and fiction are so intermixed that it is difficult to disentangle them. Dr. P.V. Kane in his meticulous study of the vast array of ancient religious literature of the Hindus states:

"there is no Vedic passage which can be cited as incontrovertibly referring to widow burning as then current nor is there any *mantra* which could be said to have repeated

in very ancient times at such burning nor do the ancient *ghrysutras* contain any direction prescribing the procedure of widow burning."¹⁰

From the time of the *Rigveda* down to the beginning of the Christian era, *sati* was practically unknown, much less practiced. In fact, it is not difficult to conclude on the basis of the Vedic texts, which are the only available records from that age, that *sati* was neither advocated nor practiced in the Vedic period. However, it is believed by some scholars that the practice of burning widows existed in the early Vedic and post-Vedic times as well. On the basis of the second *anuvaka* of the tenth *mandala* of the *Rigveda*, and two other verses found in the *Aukhya Sakha* of the *Taittiriya Samhita* quoted in the eighty-fourth *anuvaka* of the *Narayania Upanisad*, some scholars like Raja Radhakant Deb believed that this custom was prevalent during the Vedic period. However, these passages are of doubtful authenticity and cannot be accepted as incontrovertibly referring to the prevalence of the widow burning in the Vedic age. Indeed, a close scrutiny of the source materials thus makes it crystal clear that there was no early religious sanction to the custom of *sati* as was sought to be postulated by many of the self-seeking theologians.

We have only one controversial verse¹¹ in the *Rigveda*, which has sometimes been taken to refer to the existence of *sati* during this period. The proponents of *sati*, who insist that it has the sanction of the Vedas, cite the aforesaid contentious verse from the *Rigveda*, which, they say, requires the widow to sit within the fire with her dead husband's body. The *Rigveda*, however, only refers to an act, which may be appropriately termed a "mimetic ceremony" where a widow lay on her husband's funeral pyre before it was lit but was raised from it by a male relative of her dead husband. The original line in the *Rig Veda* apparently was – "*Arohantu Yonim Agre*", which may be translated to mean "Let them (mothers) go up in the dwelling first". The word "*agneh*" was, however, substituted for "*agre*". By a change of two letters, the line altered thus became – "*Arohantu Yonim Agneh*", which may be translated to mean "Let them (mothers) go up to the place of fire". Thus, a wilful manipulation was engineered in the said verse, by changing the word *agre*, meaning to go forth, into *agneh*, to the fire, at a later period in order to get Vedic sanction for the act of *sati*. The *Brahma Purana* and Apararka,

¹⁰. P.V. Kane- *History of Dharmasastra*, Vol. II, part I, p. 625. Altekar also holds the same view. A.S. Altekar - *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Delhi, p. 136.

¹¹. *Rigveda*. X. 18. 7

commentator on the *Yajnavalkyasmṛiti*, cite the aforesaid Rigvedic verse in the corrupted form as proof of ancient authority. However, the Vedic scholars have proved that this reading of the hymn is based on orthographic mistake: the significant word is *agre* (in front), not *agne* (*O Agni*). Even if we were to accept the reading *agne*, it would not mean “into the fire” for the word would still be in the vocative case and signify that *agni* was being addressed. The connotation of into the fire would be there only if the word were in the dative case, which would be *agnaye*.

The fact is that the Vedic texts exhorts the widow to return to her social obligations as she was not expected or required to adopt death upon the demise of her husband. That the above-mentioned controversial *Rigvedic* verse could not possibly require the widow to die with her deceased husband becomes clear beyond an iota of doubt in the verse that immediately follows. This *Rigvedic* hymn¹², which describes the funeral ceremony, appears to be addressed by a priest to a widow who sat near the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Directing the wife to accept her loving husband’s death, it instructs her to arise from his side to resume her place in the world. Thus even though the Rigvedic verse (eighth book) requires the widow to lie down by the side of her husband’s corpse on the funeral pyre, but a younger brother of the dead or somebody else then proceeds to the pyre, hold the left hand of the woman and ask her to come away, saying : “Rise up, woman, thou art lying by one whose life is gone; come, come to the world of the living, away from thy husband, and become the wife of him who holds thy hand and is willing to marry thee”.¹³ The word *jivaloka* (the world of life or the world of the living) in the said verse is certainly enough to support the view that a widow was not consigned to flames but brought back to the living world to lead her life as usual. The above exhortation to the widow has been taken by early writers and commentators such as Asvalayana and Sayana to imply a directive to the wife to continue her dead husband’s line by means of *niyoga*.

In a subsequent mantra, she is asked to bring away the bit of gold from the hand of the corpse, with the following words: ‘for the promotion of thy wealth, and glory as a *Brahmana* woman, and beauty and power, take the gold from the hand of the dead (and

¹². *Rigveda*, X. 18. 8

¹³. उदीर्घं नार्यभि जीवलोकं गतासुमेतमुपशेष एहि ।
हस्तग्राभस्य दिधिषोस्तवेदं पत्युर्जनित्वमभिसंबभूथ ॥

abide) in this (region); we (shall dwell) here well-served and prospering, and overcoming all presumptuous assailants". The *Ksatriya* and the *Vaisya* woman are addressed likewise, the words bow and jewel being respectively substituted for gold and *Ksatriya* and *Vaisya* respectively for *Brahmana*. It is thus obvious that even though it was customary for the widow to lie by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral pyre, but instead of immolating herself she was asked to come down and a prayer was offered that she would lead a prosperous life enjoying the bliss of children and wealth. It is thus obvious that the custom of *sati* is nowhere evidenced in the *Rigveda*. The case for recommending the performance of *sati* could be rendered plausible only by unfairly changing the last word of the stanza from *agre* to *agneh*. Thus only by flagrant distortion of a hymn was the prevalence of the custom forcibly put into the text. From the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, we find that while returning from the funeral pyre, the widow took away from her husband's hand objects like bow, gold, jewels, etc., which were burnt with the widow in an earlier age. A hope was then expressed that the widow and her relatives would lead a happy and prosperous life.¹⁴

The aforesaid discussions leave us with little doubt that the *Rigvedic* texts, instead of recommending the performance of *sati*, prove directly the opposite, i.e. the return of the widow from her husband's corpse into a happy life and her remarriage. It is apparent that the devotion to life and its pleasures marks the *Rigveda* and this is reflected in it where there is no stipulation or recommendation incorporated in its text of the practice of *sati*. The reasons that led to the discontinuation of the *sati* custom in the Vedic age can only be inferred. Probably the finer cultural outlook, which the Vedic Aryans had developed by this time, had convinced them that the custom was a barbarous one; probably they found themselves in a minority in India and felt the compelling necessity to increase their population in order to ensure their political domination. Because of the special position they gave to their womenfolk, the burning of women did not conform to the pattern of their life. Instead of allowing widows to be burnt, they thought that it would be better to encourage them to live and increase the population by remarriage or levirate,¹⁵ an act apparently designed to consolidate property. In the *Sutra* period also, she was allowed to marry any near kinsman, without any intervening period according to

¹⁴. धनुर्हस्तादाददाना मृतस्य श्रियै ब्रह्मणे तेजसे बलाय ।

अत्रैव त्वमिह वयं सुशेवा विश्वाः स्पृघोऽभिजातीर्जयेम ॥ VI, I

¹⁵. Altekar- *op. cit.*, p. 118.

Gautama, and with some intervening period of ascetic practices, according to Baudhayana and Vasishtha.

The *Atharvaveda*¹⁶ also refers to the lying down of widow by the dead husband on funeral pyre as an ancient custom, but in the very next verse¹⁷, which is the same as the aforesaid verse (X. 18. 8) of the *Rigveda*, she is asked to get up and come to this world. The *Atharvaveda* uses the same command, as in *Rigveda*, to the wife to arise from the side of her dead husband; it also prescribes the continuation of the line through the same widowed woman. A ritual prayer for blessings to continue the line would be ludicrous if the widow were to burn herself to death with her husband. Baudhayana¹⁸, an early writer on *Smriti* or codes of conduct, prescribes both these verses to be recited, one while sitting beside the corpse, the other when rising from the place. Another writer Brihaddevata¹⁹ says that the first verse is to be recited when the wife ascends the funeral pyre and the second verse is to be recited by the brother of the deceased husband who prevents her from dying.

Whatever the reasons may have been, it is undisputed that the *sati* custom had gone out of vogue among the Aryans at the time they had entered India. Nor is *sati* featured in the literature that developed in the wake of the Vedas, whether the Hindu expository texts stemming from the period 1,000 to 500 B.C or the early Buddhist literature. The vast literature comprising the Brahmanas as *Aranyakas* and *Upanisadas* contains no reference to the prevalence of *sati* during this period. Even the *sutras*, which provide the minute details of all the rituals, maintain complete silence to the knowledge of this custom. The *Grihyasutras* (c. 600 BC – c. 300 BC), which lay down the daily regimen for family life to the last detail, in spite of the detailed discussion of various rituals and *samskaras* in them, do not have any directions for *sati*. These examples from a body of sacred law that is considered to be the fountainhead of the entire Hindu tradition clearly suggest that the custom was neither approved nor practiced in the Vedic age.

The Buddhist literature is silent as regards the practice of *sati* and we do not come across any specific reference to *sati* in the Buddhist text. Had it been widely prevalent

¹⁶. *Atharvaveda*. XVIII. 3. 1

¹⁷. *Atharvaveda*. XVIII. 3. 2

¹⁸. *Baudhayana Pitramedhasutra*, 1. 8. 7

¹⁹. *Brihaddevata*, 8.13

during this period, Buddha would have vehemently opposed this inhuman practice and definitely launched a crusade against it. But another viewpoint is that Buddha did not refer to this custom probably because it was not prevalent in the area with which Buddha's activities were connected. However, this argument does not carry much weight since Buddha must have interacted with the people from the various parts of the subcontinent and would have accordingly been aware of the practice of *sati* had it been widely followed. Whatever be the factual position, it is very obvious that the practice of *sati* must not have been practiced in a big way in that age; otherwise it seems improbable to have escaped the attention of Buddha. The Buddhist texts made no mention of support for the custom of *sati* and widows were instead welcomed as nuns if they so chose. Some of the votive inscriptions at Buddhist *stupas* record donations by widows. The later Jaina texts conceded that in special circumstances a Jaina *muni* could die by slow starvation; this concession prevented the Jainas from opposing other forms of suicide. However, judging by the large number of Jaina widows who became nuns, it is evident that although some might have become *satis*, this was not the prevailing custom among the Jainas.

It is obvious that the custom of *sati* received no support from the Hindu lawgivers till much later. Though we have in the *Smritis* and the *Dharmasastras* an elaborate discussion of the duties of women and widows as well as suicides in general, there are very few references in these texts to the custom of *sati*. In the *Dharmasastras* (c.400 B.C. to 100 A.D.), there are only rare references to *sati*, as in the *Visnu* and *Vyasa Samhita*. It is also pertinent to mention that the *Dharmasastras* like *Vishnu* are not free from interpolations. Moreover, except the *Visnu* and *Vyasa Samhitas*, none of the *Dharmasastras* contain any reference to *sati*. In any case, Brihaspati²⁰ as well as *Visnu* make self immolation as an alternative to life-long asceticism for a widow. The *Visnu-dharmasastra* declares: "On her husband's death the widow should observe celibacy or should ascend the funeral pyre after him."²¹ Shukra²² leaves it to the choice of widow herself, whether to follow her dead husband or to keep living in the world. In the latter case, she was incessantly to worship gods, revere the memory of her husband and perform other regular penances.

²⁰. Brihaspati. XXIV. 11

²¹. *Visnu*. XXV. 14

²². Shukra IV. 4. 28. 29

The writers of the early *Smritis* - i.e. texts on codes of conduct, like Manu and Yajnavalkya (100 A.D. to 300 A.D.), considered among the greatest scriptural authorities the writers of the most authoritative of Hindu law books, have laid down specific rules on the duties of widows and strongly recommended for them a pure, chaste and austere life but Manu²³ and Yajnavalkya²⁴ have issued no specific injunctions for them to become *satis*. According to them, she should stay after the death of her husband, but always deeply absorbed in the observance of severe austerities.

The authoritative *Manusmriti*, a second century C.E. text known for its restrictive injunctions on women, does not prescribe the act of wife-burning. On the contrary, Manu considers a woman to be *pujarha grahadiptayah* - "worthy to be worshipped and the lamp that lights up the household." Manu does not commend the performance of *sati* by a widow. He observes: "A faithful wife who desires to dwell after death with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead. Until death, let her be patient of hardships, self-controlled and chaste and strive to fulfill that most exalted duty which is prescribed for wives who have one husband only."²⁵ Thus Manu does not recommend that the widow should die with her husband. She was only to pass the remaining portion of her life in absolute self-negation proving loyal to her husband and offering homage to him in her thought as well as in her deed. The ideal for her was a life of celibacy after the death of her husband.

Other early writers on *Smriti* - i.e. texts on codes of conduct, such as Vasistha or Yajnavalkya have not spoken on the issue of *sati* let alone endorse or recommend the custom. Vasistha allows the remarriage of women in certain unusual circumstances, such as a husband who is insane, lost or impotent.²⁶ However, rather than allowing remarriage, Yajnavalkya prescribes the duties of a widow.²⁷ Strict as these are, Yajnavalkya remains one of the most liberal-minded *Smriti* writers, who thought of wives as gifts of the gods who must be respected and valued. He also laid down the rules of inheritance for wives,

²³. Manu V. 158, 160

²⁴. Yajnavalkya I. 75

²⁵. Manu, IX. 101

²⁶. *Vasistha Dharmasutra*, XVII. 72

²⁷. *Yajnavalkyasmriti*, 1. 81

which, of course, created more problems for women in later times. Obviously, if codes of conduct and inheritance for widows were to make any sense, the burning of wives and widows was hardly being sanctioned at that time.

Moreover, *Smritis*, even wherever they approve *sati*, put certain restrictions on widows. They unequivocally declare: "Wives, who have a child of tender years, who are pregnant, who have not attained puberty and who are in their monthly course do not mount the funeral pyre of their husbands".²⁸ Such observations, when read together, show that the burning of widows was a rare occurrence. Thus, not many commentators and jurists in that age were insistent on the observance of the practice of *sati*. Nor did there exist any deep-rooted and universally acceptable conviction in those days about the absolute religious necessity of this practice. The aforesaid discussions clearly indicate that till the early centuries of the Christian era, the widow did not normally lay down her life when her husband died.

The fact that *sati* is not featured in the earliest religious texts and is referred to infrequently in the later literature leading up to the Christian era is supported by historical information that tracks the first instance of *sati* only back to the fourth century B.C. The earliest historical instance of *sati* in India mentioned to have taken place in the 4th century B.C., has been cited by Diodorus Siculus, who has given a graphic account of the said *sati* committed in B.C. 316.²⁹ He has cited the performance of *sati* by the younger wife of a general named Keteus, a leader of the Indian contingent, who died while fighting against Antigonus. As early as the fourth century, B.C., references to the custom of *sati* are found in the northwestern corner of India, particularly Taxila and near the bank of the Iravati, now in Pakistan, where the custom might have been introduced by Scythian invaders. The Greek observers who accompanied Alexander when he attacked India in the 326 B.C. were struck by the 'Strange and unusual' Indian customs. Strabo cited Aristoboulos, Alexander's companion, whose account throws light on the practice of widow-burning. Strabo wrote in about B.C. 20 –

²⁸. *Brahmnaradiya Purana*, quoted in Parasaramadhaviya, II, pt. I, p.58

²⁹. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnall, Hobson-Jobson (ed. William Crooke), article, "Suttee", p. 879

“He (Aristoboulos) says that he had heard from some persons of wives burning themselves voluntarily with their deceased husbands and that women who refused to submit to this custom were disgraced.”³⁰

The Greek observers who accompanied Alexander tell us that the custom was prevalent among the Kathians or the Kathas of the Punjab. From the accounts of Strabo, we learn that the Macedonian Greeks accompanying Alexander found that *sati* was practiced among the Cathaei, Kathians or the Kathas tribe in the Punjab in the 4th century B.C.³¹. The practice is said to have arisen from the apprehension that their wives would desert or poison their husbands. The Greek thus had a theory about the origin of the practice. As per this premise, some of the lascivious wives used to poison their husbands by secret means in order to get rid of them and enjoyed themselves with their paramours. To deter them from murdering their husbands, the widows were compelled to be burnt with them. The Greek writer Diodorus Siculus thus hints at some connection between infidelities of wife with the custom of *sati*. He noted that unfaithful wives caught poisoning their husbands were made to perform *sati* rite. However, from other sources, including, Epic-evidences, such conclusions are not indicated. Moreover, it seems unlikely for a Hindu woman to commit the crime of killing her husband to make her lot worse than before.

Here, it is pertinent to mention that the custom of *sati* mentioned by the Greek writers is said to be prevalent amongst some frontier tribes and is mentioned along with the stories which are otherwise not corroborated in Indian history. We must not lose sight of the fact that both Diodorus and Strabo wrote around the beginning of the Christian era drawing information from the writings of two generals who had accompanied Alexander to India for the purpose of conquest more than three centuries earlier. On the other hand, a contemporary writer like Megasthenes, who spent so many years in the Mauryan court and was a keen observer of Indian life, is absolutely silent on this point. Hence, it stands to reason not to take the stories of Strabo and Diodorus for granted.

Increasingly, however, with the onset of the first millennium A.D., *sati* begins to make occasional appearances in the popular religious texts of early Hinduism, the *Epics* and the *Puranas*. *Sati* begins to get mention in these texts as an option for widows but so

³⁰. *Ibid.*

³¹. Strabo, XV, I.30 & 62, Hamilton and Falconer's translation, Vol. IV

is a life of asceticism. However, it is pertinent to note that the Epics and the *Puranas* are works that developed by continuous accretion over a thousand-year period beginning in 5th century B.C. Moreover, some of the references to *sati* in these texts have been attributed to later interpolations.

In any case, *sati* was still not at all a common phenomenon in the period represented by the Epics. The wives of Dasaratha and Ravana survived them. Tara, the wife of Bali, also did not commit *sati* when her husband died. There is only one case of *sati* in the *Ramayana*³² when we come across a reference to the self-immolation of a *brahmana* woman, the wife of a *brahmarisi* and mother of Vedavati, who when molested by Ravana burnt herself in fire. However, the *Uttara Kanda*, where it has been referred to, is a later rendition, in the opinion of Indologists. In her extreme sorrow, consequent upon her supposed widowhood, Sita requested Ravana to kill her and obtain the merit of joining a wife to her husband. Tara made a similar request to Rama. There was no need of making such a request had there been *sati* custom in existence. Though Kaushalya hints at the custom of *sati*, when she says that she will embrace the king's body and will enter fire³³, but even she does not perform *sati*. There was no need of committing *sati* apparently because the *Ramayana* suggests that the merit of joining the husband in heaven was gained by the surviving wives also.³⁴ We see that Dasaratha's widows united with him in the heaven were greatly delighted. It is not strange, therefore, that in the *Ramayana*, none of the wives of Dasaratha or Ravana feels compelled to think that a widow should not survive her husband. In fact, in the *Ramayana*, we find references to the widows following funeral processions³⁵ in carriages.

Mahabharata though it is profuse in the descriptions of sanguinary fights, is very sparing in its reference to the practice of *sati*. Thus even though the *Mahabharata*-age was not free from the pernicious practice of *sati*, the facts thrown up by *Mahabharata* make it clear that *sati* was not universally practiced in the period described in the *Mahabharata*. Those specifically mentioned in the *Mahabharata* to have committed self-immolation upon the death of their husband include: Madri, the second and favourite wife of Pandu, widows of Vasudeva – Devaki, Bhadra, Rohini and Madira, and consorts of

32. *Ramayana* VII. 17.15

33. *Ramayana* II. 66.12

34. *Ramayana* VII. 99.16-17

35. *Ramayana*, IV. 25, 33-35; II. 76. 19-20

Krishna – Rukmani, Saihya, Haimavati and Jambavati. The first case of *sati* in the *Mahabharata*, occurring in the *Adi-Parva*, is that of Madri³⁶, the favourite wife of Pandu, who burnt herself with her husband's body because, it is described that she was not sure that she could lead an ideal life. However, according to many scholars, the aforesaid story of Madri's self-immolation is mainly redacted. As the story part of the *Mahabharata* corresponds to the Sutra period and nowhere in the *Grihyasutras* do we find *sati* sanctioned, this may quite possibly be a later redaction. From the *Mausala-Parva*, we learn that Vasudeva's four wives Devaki, Bhadra, Rohini and Madira ascended his funeral pyre.³⁷ But there are a large number of widows in the *Mahabharata* who survived their husbands such as the wives of Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha and Drona. It is significant that on the death of the fallen heroes of Kurukshetra, no mention is made of any widow burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, though the chariots, clothes and weapons of the warriors are said to have been consigned to fire with the dead warriors. Rather, the widows of the fallen Kaurava heroes are shown as performing the last rites of their husbands. Thus among the thousands of the widows of the heroes slain in the war, none followed their husbands as *sati* though some of them are said to have killed themselves by drowning. The *Stri-Parva* in the *Mahabharata* is full of lamentations and funeral ceremonies performed for the fallen Kauravas, but there is not a single case of *sati*. The epic states that the widows of the fallen heroes remained behind and offered them funeral oblations. The cases of group suicide by the widows of Krishna due to their insecure position should also not be taken as examples of *sati*. It is mentioned that Rukmini, Saihya, Haimavati, Jambavati among the consorts of Krishna burnt themselves along with his dead body while other queens such as Satyabhama went to the forest for toil and meditation.³⁸ It is also mentioned in the *Vishnu Purana* that eight queens of Krishna – Rukmini among others – entered fire on his death.³⁹ The protector, to whom Krishna handed them over, comes across as old, weak and ineffective for he could not save some of the co-wives when they were taken away by the robbers.⁴⁰ It thus appears that the sense of insecurity made the widows of Krishna feel that it was difficult for them to live up to the ideal of chastity. This case of group-suicide by women may be cited as the earliest example of protecting honour by burning as an outcome of war, invasion or

36. *Mahabharata*, I. 95. 65

37. *Mahabharata* .XVI. 7. 18

38. *Mahabharata* .XVI. 7. 73-74

39. *Vishnu Purana*, V. 38.2

40. *Mahabharata*, XVI. 7. 45-58

insecurity. Another case of group-suicide in the *Mahabharata* is that of the wives of Kauravas⁴¹ though they resorted to it not in the immediate aftermath of the death of their husbands. As for the possible reason which made the Kaurava ladies commit suicide after such a long time at the instigation of Vyasa, it might have been due to the miserable and insignificant existence they were dragging on after the death of their husbands. Thus, it might have been due to disgust that they committed suicide. However, only by the time the *Shanti-Parva* was written, meritorious result had come to be attached to the custom of *sati* in order to encourage it, as highlighted through the story narrating the example of Kapoti (she-pigeon), by emphasizing that if in the manner of the she-pigeon a woman performs *sati* she would shine like her in the heaven.⁴² Keeping in view the fact that the *Mahabharata* took its final shape sometime before the Gupta period, it should not be surprising that some of these references were added at a later stage.

The *Visnu Purana*, the *Padma Purana*, the *Bhagavata* and the *Brahma Purana* also cite instances of *sati*, thus indicating that the institution was slowly emerging in our society between A.D. 400 and 600. The custom seems to have become popular especially in *ksatriya* circles since c. 400 A.D. Vatsyayana points out (IV. 2. 53) how clever dancing girls gained ascendancy over the minds of their lovers by swearing that they would burn themselves on their funeral pyres. Bhasa (*Dutaghatotkacha* and *Urubhanga*), Kalidasa (*Kumarasambhava*, *Ritusamhara*), Sudraka (*Mrichchhakatika*, Act X), Bana (*Kadambari*) have all referred to the prevalence of this custom though none of them mentions of any religious sanction behind this custom. In the *Mrichchhakatika*, the wife of Charudatta wants to burn herself before the arrival of the expected news of her husband's execution (Act. X). Bana has given a vivid picture of the tragic burning of the queen Yashovati, the wife of King Prabhakara-Vardhana of Thanesar and mother of Harsha, in A.D. 604.⁴³ The *Rajatarangini* composed in the twelfth century refers to quite a number of widows who burned themselves on the pyre of King Yasokora VI, Abhimanyu, Tunga etc.⁴⁴

However, the aforesaid discussion pertaining to the period of the great Epics clearly indicate that the number of cases of *satis* as compared to the number of widows

⁴¹. *Mahabharata* XV. 33. 20-21, *Mahabharata* IX. 39. 33-34

⁴². *Mahabharata* XII. 149. 15 ff.

⁴³. The *Harsha-Carita* of Bana (Tr. E.B. Cowell and F.W. Thomas), p.148

⁴⁴. *Rajatarangini* (ed. Ranjit Sitaram Pandit), VI, 195, VII, 103, VIII, 363.

that survived is significant. It is because the custom was only in its infancy and was gradually developing. Moreover, the instances of *sati* referred to in the Epics and the *Puranas* show that the custom was originally confined only to royal families and great warriors. However, it was not binding even on the widows of the warriors to enter the funeral pyre of their husbands; though the practice was resorted to, in the age of the Epics, especially by some of the widows belonging to the upper strata of the society; the practice was not at all common in that period. This is indicated in the works of the various writers even belonging to the period as late as the seventh century A.D. Thus, in Bana's *Kadambari*, Chandrapida addresses Mahasveta and cites the famous instances of women like Rati, Kunti, Uttara and Dushalya who did not commit self-immolation.⁴⁵ Thus even in the post-Vedic ages as also in the early centuries of the first millennium A.D., *sati* was not the universal lot of Hindu women. Very few women actually ascended their husband's funeral pyres. Even, among the *ksatriyas* there was no universal adherence to the custom.

5.2 HISTORICAL EVIDENCE OF WIDOW-BURNING

As mentioned above, the earliest historical instance of *sati* in India mentioned to have taken place in the 4th century B.C., has been cited by Diodorus Siculus, who has given a graphic account of the said *sati* committed in B.C. 316.⁴⁶ We also have epigraphic records referring to the practice of *sati* in the ancient period. The earliest one is an inscription engraved in A.D. 510 (191 of the Gupta era) on a pillar found at Eran near Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, i.e., the Eran posthumous inscription of Goparaja⁴⁷, wherein it is said that his wife followed him on the pyre after his death in the battle against the Hunas. A Nepalese inscription⁴⁸ of somewhat later period (A.D. 705) refers to queen Rajyavati, the widow of Dharmadeva following her husband to the funeral pyre. The Belataru inscription⁴⁹ of Saka 979 of the time of Rajendra Cola Deva also refers to the custom. We find many inscriptions giving details about several instances of *sati* from 510 A.D. to the end of the 13th century which testify to the continuity of the practice of

⁴⁵. *Banabhatta's Kadambari* (tr. by C.M.Ridding), p. 137.

⁴⁶. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnall, Hobson-Jobson (ed. William Crooke), article, "Suttee", p. 879.

⁴⁷. Fleet, *CII*, Vol. III, p. 91; *IA*, IX, 164; Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, Vol. I, pp.335-36, verse 4.

⁴⁸. *IA*, IX, pp.163 ff.

⁴⁹. *EI*, VI, p. 213.

sati. These inscriptions clearly point to this custom as coming into general use, at least among the ruling classes, under the Guptas, the Vardhanas and their successors till the coming of the Muslims in the 9th century A.D. Inscriptional and archaeological sources, including *sati* stones erected at the sites of immolation, suggest that the practice was increasing towards the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennium A.D. Besides, there are also instances of how stone monuments, called *masti-kal* (*masti-kallu* or *mastigallu*), i.e. stone-monument for *mahasati*, and *vira-kal* (*virakallu* or *viragallu*) for brave and devoted men, were erected in memory of *satis* and men.⁵⁰

Whether the practice was Dravidian or Aryan in origin it cannot be said for certain but we have instances of it occurring pretty frequently in South India; the earliest known, of a historical character, being the death of the wife of Bhuta Pandya, an early celebrity in Tamil literature. One poem ascribed to her is to be found in the collection known as *Purananuru*. Thus, there is a numerous class of archaeological monuments in South India, known as *Virakal* and *Mastikal* referred to above. The latter term represents *maha-sati-kal*, i. e. a stone erected in memory of one who performed a *mahasati*, or act of self-immolation by a woman on the pyre of her husband.⁵¹ The former is a stone erected in the memory of a man who displayed valour, either on the fields of battle or by some other act of personal courage.

Inscriptions from the peninsula refer to women becoming *satis* when their husbands died in battles fought between and among Hindu rulers as the Chalukyas, Yadavas and Hoysalas, in the period from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries A.D. Many of these inscriptions are located in Maharashtra and Karnataka. The peak period of *sati* in these areas was pre-Islamic in that Muslim invasions were not the cause. However, when faced by Turkish armies from the end of the thirteenth century, the earlier ritual would have continued. The other interesting feature is that most of these inscriptions refer either to families of *ksatriya* status or those seeking such a status.

The Belataru inscription of the time of Rajendra-coladeva records the interesting story of a *Sudra* woman, Dekabbe, who is said to have burnt herself, on hearing of the death of her husband, in spite of strong protests and opposition from her

⁵⁰. IA, XXXV, p. 129-30 (vide the paper, 'Sati- immolation which is not sati').

⁵¹. IA, XXXV, p. 129.

parents and relations. Her husband held a high military position under Chola control. Her insistence may have been occasioned, among other things, by the wish to establish status. The custom it would seem was prevalent at this time among those who held high administrative and military positions generally associated with *ksatriyas*. Therefore it is likely that members of lower castes holding similar positions emulated the style of the *ksatriyas*.⁵² When she burnt herself, her parents erected a fine monument for her.⁵³ The epigraph is important as it is perhaps the first inscription concerning the 'self- immolation of a *sudra* wife after her husband's death.'⁵⁴ Moreover, the remarkable thing to take note of in this connection is that there is no pyre (*cita, citi, citya*, the *tadbhava* form of which is *sidige* in Kannada), but a *konda* (*tadbhava* of the Sanskrit word *Kunda*), a hole in the ground for any fire, especially for the pyre of a burnt oblation. This *sati* has been further compared to *Sri, Gauri, Saci, Sita, Rati* and similar other Hindu goddesses.⁵⁵

We have another grant of Saka 1103 (A.D. 1181) to a temple by Sinda Mahamandalesvara Racamalla on a request by two *satis*⁵⁶ - Bailiyakka and Malapaniyakka - both widows of his general Baciraja. Another inscription of Cedi samvat 919 refers to three queens who became *satis*.⁵⁷ Besides these, we have many other references to *sati*, though belonging to a later period.

Another indication of the existence of *satis* are the *sati memorial stones*. These have been recorded and studied in some detail only in recent years. The location, numbers, chronology and the statements both inscriptional and visual, of the hero-stones and the associated *sati*- stones have provided new insights into the history of these areas (S. Setter and G.D. Sontheimer, *Memorial Stones*, Dharwad, 1982). Some of these areas were subject to raids by kingdoms in the vicinity, contesting this territory. The *sati*- stones generally occur in the same locality as the hero-stones which commemorated death in the course of a heroic act of either defending the village or a herd of cattle or of killing predatory wild animals and so on. Sometimes the *sati*-stone and the hero-stone are on the same slab. The *sati*-stone has a standard set of symbols: the sun and the moon indicating eternity, an upright, open, right arm and hand, bent at the elbow and clearly showing

⁵². Romila Thapar- *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁵³. *EI*, VI, p. 213; *Ep. Circ.*, IV, Hg. No. 18.

⁵⁴. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁵⁵. Upendra Thakur-*The History of Suicide in India*, p. 150.

⁵⁶. *EI*, XIV, pp. 265-67.

⁵⁷. *Ibid.*, XX, p. 168.

bangles intact (a woman's bangles being broken when she is widowed, the bangles being intact would be an indication of her continuing marital status); a lime held in the hand to ward off evil.⁵⁸ On occasion a *sati* is indicated by a single standing female figure or a couple, where generally the right arm of the woman has the same features as above.

Sati-stones like hero-stones occur more often, not in fertile agricultural mainland but in ecologically marginal areas, where local conflicts and skirmishes would be frequent. Possibly in marginal areas, the process of transition from tribe to *jati* may have required an underlining of the new norms which would have implications for the inheritance and status of women.⁵⁹ It has been maintained that the practice of widow burning must have played an important role in the process of *ksatriya*-isation and assimilation into the Sanskritic tradition. Doubtless by now, *sati* would also have played a part in the adoption of a *ksatriya* lifestyle.

Inscriptional and archaeological evidence suggests that the greater occurrence of immolation seems to date to the end of the first and the early second millennium A.D. This was a time of new areas being opened up to settlement by the caste-based society and encroachments on a larger scale into tribal areas. New castes emerged in this background of a changing economy, some with antecedents in the earlier pre-caste society. In the competition for status, various observances of upper caste society became current.

In the villages of Budhpur and Buram (Manbhum district in Bihar), there are several stones referred to as *sati*-pillars. Some of them are inscribed, but all are more or less sculptured; the general subjects appear to be a man drawing a bow, sometimes on horseback, but more often on foot, showing that the husbands of those in whose memories these pillars stand were warriors slain in battle.

In the village of Budhpur, there are a few *sati*-pillars; two of them were inscribed, but the weather has not left the writing legible. On the first one, the only word legible is *Yuva-raj*a and in the second, which is also the last line, the first line is illegible.⁶⁰ As a

⁵⁸. Romila Thapar, *op. cit.*, p.87.

⁵⁹. *Ibid.*

⁶⁰. *JBORS*, XXIII, p. 431.

matter of fact, the district of Manbhum contains numerous monuments of a peculiar sort, but of a much later date which are crude stone carvings, and are placed here and there in front of the temples. All authorities, from Prinsep to Cunningham onwards, have, without exception, considered them to be either *Virakal* (monuments to warriors killed in battle, or in some cases in hunting wild beasts) or *sati* memorials. Jayaswal has dated the inscriptions on these memorials from the form of the letters as being 700 A.D. and 1000 A.D.⁶¹

These *Virakal* and *sati* monuments are of great interest as they show examples of weapons and accoutrements, the method of doing the hair, and other particulars of different periods and localities, and in some cases they refer to the names of the rulers and states or districts of the times.⁶² The inscription on one of these *sati*-stones partially reads: *Rajaputra Sri Vadadhuga (Chadadhuga)* and may be dated 900-1000 A.D.⁶³

PLATES I & II are *sati*- memorial stones bearing only a female figure belonging to about the 10th century A.D. (at the back of the thesis) from Manbhum district, Bihar.

Besides the above stones, a number of small plaques showing a man and a woman together were found during the excavations of 1940-44 on the site of Ahicchatra (District Bareilly, U.P.), described as *Sati-Satta Plaques* (Terracotta figurines), belonging to A.D. 850-1100,⁶⁴ except one assigned to A.D. 650-750. (PLATES-III-V) The plaques are thin and rectangular, half of them having rounded tops, and all are made from shallow moulds. The male and female figures stand facing, with the left hand of the male and the right hand of the female figure crossed at the back and placed on each other's shoulder. The male figure usually stands on the left. The relief is invariably superficial, with no attention to details of ornaments or drapery. The style is crude, showing similarity with the figures on *sati*-stones.⁶⁵

The plaques served a votive purpose being used as offerings near *sati*-stones at places, called *sati-caura* (places where images of *sati* are installed and regularly

⁶¹. *Ibid.*, p. 434.

⁶². *JBORS*, XXIII, p. 436-42. s

⁶³. *Ibid.*, p. 438.

⁶⁴. V.S. Agrawala- 'Terracotta figurines of Ahicchatra, District Bareilly, U.P. ', in *Ancient India*, No. 4, p. 178, Pl. III-V (at end of thesis)

⁶⁵. Upendra Thakur- *A History of Suicide in India*, p. 155.

worshipped by people). The couples on the *sati*-pillars in Bundelkhand, where they still abound, are known as *Sati-Satta*, a term which has been adopted to designate figures of this type.⁶⁶ The stratigraphical evidence supported by the style shows the figures to belong to the advanced medieval period. In several specimens the woman wears a petticoat (*lahanga*) as was worn by the Rajput women of that age. Out of thirty-seven pieces, thirty-four are assignable to 9th-11th centuries. There is one exception, showing an earlier style (about the eighth century).

As a matter of fact, *Virakal* and *sati*-memorial stones are found in many places throughout India. An example is the pillar at Balod in the Central Provinces, now in the Nagpur Museum. This stone had served as a memorial of three successive *satis* and bears three inscriptions. The two later inscriptions are worn off, but the earliest remains. The characters of this inscription, according to Prinsep, belong to the 2nd century A.D.⁶⁷ We have got one such epigraph at Eran which is dated in the Gupta year 191, i. e. A.D. 510-11⁶⁸. One at Baro in Malwa is dated by Cunningham as of the 9th or 10th century.⁶⁹ Another at Satanwara is dated *samvat* 1016, i.e., A.D. 959,⁷⁰ one at Hindorial in the Damoh district of the Central Provinces is dated A.D. 1056.⁷¹ The earliest *sati*-stone discovered in Rajasthan goes back to 838 A.D. and there are many others which attest to its prevalence only after the latter half of the ninth century A.D. The majority of the old stones, however, belong to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

They are very numerous in the Mysore Province and the Saugor district of the erstwhile Central Provinces. Khimlas, an old town 41 miles from Saugor, contains perhaps the largest number of these stones, 51 of which are inscribed. Almost all of them are dated, the dates ranging from *samvat* 1510 (1453 A.D.) to *samvat* 1880 (1823 A.D.).

The practice of *sati*, sanctified by long tradition and encouraged by the *brahmins*, was firmly established and became an integral part of Hindu social system in the medieval period. Now it began to be viewed with reverence. Alberuni (973- 1048 A.D.), a distinguished scholar who made numerous insightful observances on the

⁶⁶ V.S. Agarwala- *op. cit.*, Plates III -V

⁶⁷ *ASIR*, vol. vii, pp. 136-37.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. xx, p. 45.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. x, p.75.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. vii, p. 94.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, vol. ix, p. 53.

character, manners and customs of the Hindus, noticed the practice of *sati* among the Hindus. He wrote that Hindu women burnt themselves because they were ill-treated and they considered it preferable to die with their husbands.⁷² He mentioned particularly the wives of Hindu kings who were in the habit of burning themselves whether they wished it or not.⁷³ Amir Khusro, the most notable poet of Balban's reign (1266-1286), was greatly impressed by the Hindu widow's inspired love of her dying husband on account of which she sacrificed herself with reckless abandon. He wrote:

" *Ham chu Hindu zan Kasey dar ashki Devana naist Sokhtan
Bar Shamyar Murda Karay her parwana naist*".⁷⁴

5.3 DIVERSE VIEWS ON SATI

Initially, the custom of *sati* was mainly confined to kings and the upper strata of society among the *ksatriyas* with whom the burning of women was a point of honour. With the passage of time, the *brahmins* also adopted *sati*, though several Hindu digest-writers had disapproved of the practice among *brahmin* wives. As regards the self-immolation of the *brahmin* widows, we have a conflicting and unclear picture in the literature. The *Ramayana* refers to the self-immolation of a *brahmin* woman, the wife of a *brahmarsi* and mother of Vedavati, who burnt herself in the fire when molested by Ravana.⁷⁵ The only case of performance of *sati* by a *brahmin* widow in the *Mahabharata* is found in the *Adi-Parva*.⁷⁶ However, the fact remains that the *brahmin* ladies did not practice *sati* even long after the *Mahabharata* gained its present shape. Hence the said instance of *sati* in the *Mahabharata* may quite possibly be a later redaction. Interestingly, Max Muller blames the *brahmins* for validating *sati*, which he considers to be part of their general strategy to keep society under their control. There might be something to this argument because *brahmin* women were discouraged from following their dead husbands to death. Several texts are cited by Apararka, which apparently forbid self-immolation to

⁷². Alberuni's *India* (ed. Edward S. Sachau), Vol.II, p.155.

⁷³. *Ibid*.

⁷⁴. Translation: No woman's love so fierce and great is found, As fast within a Hindu's heart is bound, Not every mother that dares such love obtain can learn to burn on an extinguished flame. Quoted in Persian, N.R. Nand- Biography of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, p.92.

⁷⁵. *Ramayana*, Uttarakanda, 17.15

⁷⁶. *Mahabharata*, I. 182. 22.

brahmin widows (quoted by Aparaka, p. 112). The *Veda-vyasa-smṛiti*⁷⁷, however, advises a *brahmin* widow to enter fire, clasping the dead body of her husband, but further adds that in case she does not, she should give up all luxuries and emaciate her body by austerities. The aforesaid facts indicate that the practice of *sati* was initially prevalent among the *ksatriyas*, and the burning of *brahmin* widows on a large scale began much later. It also appears that outside the ruling and military classes and priestly families, the custom did not make a wide appeal and it is not difficult to conclude that even in the medieval period, when the custom became truly entrenched and widespread, only an infinitesimal number of widows in the general population were immolating themselves.

Among the commentators on *Smṛiti* literature, especially the *Dharmasastras*, two strands can be detected on the question of *sati*. Some commentators either wholeheartedly or half-heartedly advocate it, others do not. Thus, Medhatithi argues against *sati* and Vijnanesvara for it. Besides Brihaspati, the custom is admired by Parasara⁷⁸ (though surprisingly, he permits widow to remarry only two verses earlier) and Angirasa quoted by Apararka and Medhatithi, Harita, Apastamba etc. The *Visnudharmasutra*⁷⁹ which is assigned to A.D. 100 mentions the custom as not illogical but does not regard it as a religious duty. Visnu does not recommend *sati*, he merely mentions it. He is, in fact, one of the earliest writers to recognize widow as an heir to her husband. He allows her to remarry also.⁸⁰ Even Brihaspati does not make *sati* a binding custom and only makes it optional. One verse from a fifth century writer, Parasara, famous for advocating the remarriage of women, has often been interpreted as support for *sati*.⁸¹ The same verse appears in a work by Narada, another writer on *Smṛiti*, who again supported the remarriage of women. In this verse, Parasara approves of the remarriage of women who suffer under five impediments: the disappearance or death of the husband, the husband's being declared an outcast, the husband's renunciation of worldly life, or his impotence. In the two verses that follow, Parasara prescribes for a widow either *brahmacharya* or *anugamana* as virtuous choices. *Brahmacharya* means celibacy, but in light of the provisions laid down in the preceding verses the widow is not denied the right to marry. It is the term *anugamana* which literally means "to follow in the path (of the husband)", that

⁷⁷. *Veda-vyasa-smṛiti*, II. 53

⁷⁸. Parasara, IV. 32-33

⁷⁹. *Visnudharmasutra*, 25. 14

⁸⁰. *Visnudharmasutra*, 17. 43

⁸¹. Parasara *Smṛiti*, 4. 30-32

raises the problem here because it has been taken to mean the injunction to follow the husband to death by taking the term *anugamana* to mean *anumarana* (following [the husband] in death). But this interpretation of the term creates a serious inconsistency: if Parasara allows a woman to remarry after the death of her husband, can he, in the very next verse also require her to die on her husbands' death. Thus if we accept the term *anugamana* as synonymous with *anumarana*, then the verses on remarriage and celibacy become meaningless. There is no authority in Sanskrit usage to substitute *marana* (death) for *gamana* (going or following). *Gamana* definitely refers to following the path, which would mean that ideally a virtuous wife should follow the path travelled by her husband. To interpret that path as the path of self-immolation and the term *anugamana* as *anumarana* strains common sense and suggests a deliberate rewriting of the social code, a twisted interpretation to enforce *sati*. What we have here is the same kind of linguistic manipulation to force a particular meaning that we have seen in the case of the *Rigvedic* verse.

5.4 RESISTANCE TO WIDOW BURNING

However, it is also interesting to note that in an age when the social environment was strongly in favour of this inhuman practice and the obsessed celebrities extolled *sati* to a point of divinity, there emerged almost simultaneously an undercurrent of staunch opposition to this custom. Thus even then, as in later times, opposition to *sati* continued. Indeed, as the practice grew, so did opposition to it. However none of the *dharmasastras* except the *Vishnu Dharmashastra* contain any reference to *sati*. Voices of protest against the ritual were raised even in ancient and medieval India.

There were, however, several thinkers, who were altogether opposed to the idea of giving even a qualified recognition to the custom. Medhatithi, the ninth century commentator on Manu⁸² compares this practice to *syenayaga*, which a man performed by way of black magic to kill his enemy. Medhatithi admits that the custom has been mentioned by Angiras, but he points out that it has no authoritative support, rather it is opposed to all express Vedic texts which ban suicide altogether. Medhatithi, writing in

82. V. 157

about the tenth century A.D., is strongly opposed to widows becoming *satis*. He argues that the practice is *adharma* and *asastriya*, against the laws of *dharma* and not conceded by the *shastras*. He maintains that it amounts to suicide⁸³ which is forbidden and that each person must live their allotted span of life. He even urges that in some situations a widow should be permitted to remarry. According to Romila Thapar, Medhatithi's position was not unique and the discussion was controversial and continued to be so over the centuries.⁸⁴ *Anumarana* is declared as *adharma*, *asastriya* (not in accordance with *sastras*) by Sabara and others.⁸⁵ Virata takes a more decisive stand and positively prohibits the custom. He points out that the widow can do some good to her husband, if she survives and offers him the prescribed oblations at the *Sraddha*; if she ascends the funeral pyre, she will be only incurring the sin of suicide.⁸⁶ Devanabhata, a 12th century writer from South India, maintains that the *sati* custom is only a very inferior variety of Dharma and is not to be recommended at all. Similarly, in the 13th century *Smriti Chandrika* expressly said that *anvarohan* though recommended by *Vishnu Dharmasutra* (25.14) and Angiras, was inferior to *brahmacharya* (leading a celibate life), since the rewards of *anvarohan* are inferior to those of *brahmacharya*.⁸⁷ Thus throughout its existence this practice of widow burning was criticized by scholars and commentators even within the Hindu religion.

A woman who having first resolved to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband turned back from it at the last moment had to undergo the *prajapatya* penance.⁸⁸ In the *Rajatarangini*⁸⁹ we have one such instance. A queen having pretended to resolve on becoming *sati* ultimately regretted the step and turned back.

Indeed, as the practice grew, so did opposition to it. In the seventh century, King Harshavardhana tried to dissuade his mother from committing *sati*, though without success.⁹⁰ Though Harsha had failed to persuade his mother from burning herself, he succeeded in saving his sister Rajyashri, wife of Grahavarmana of Kanyakubja, from

⁸³. Romila Thapar- p. 86.

⁸⁴. *Ibid.*

⁸⁵. Sabara on *Jamini*, I. I. 2

⁸⁶. अनुवर्तत जीवन्तं न तु यायान्मृतं पतिम् ।

जीवदमर्तु हितं कुर्यान्मरणदात्मघातिनी ॥ Quoted by Apararka on Yaj., I, 87.

⁸⁷. P.V. Kane-*op. cit.*, p. 633.

⁸⁸. Apastamba quoted by Apararka, p. 1193 & *Suddhi- tattva*, p. 243.

⁸⁹. VI, 196.

⁹⁰. *Harshacharita*, Chapter 5

committing *sati* in the Vindhya forests.⁹¹ The seventh century witnessed the most vehement, determined and rational opposition to *sati* through Banabhatta, the great litterateur of king Harshavardhana's court. Bana was struck with horror by the tendency to eulogize *sati* and he crusaded against it.⁹² He was not even prepared to give qualified recognition to this savage practice. Bana dubs it as an act of suicide. He held that "it is a path followed by the ignorant. It is a mere freak of madness, an enterprise of recklessness". Banabhatta, writing the *Harshacharita* in the seventh century A.D. does not condemn the mother of king Harshavardhana for becoming a *sati*, perhaps because the book was an official biography. But in his other work, the *Kadambari*, he objects strongly to the practice and lists many women of high status like Rati, Kunti, Uttar and Dushalya who did not become *satis*. In his *Kadambari*, he explicitly says that it is a form of escape that is upheld only by the fools.⁹³

"To die after one's beloved" says Bana, "is most fruitless." He adds: "It is a custom followed by the foolish. It is a mistake committed under infatuation. It is a reckless course followed only on account of hot haste. It is a mistake of stupendous magnitude. It does no good whatsoever to the dead person. It does not help him in ascending to heaven; it does not prevent him from sinking into hell. It does not at all ensure union after death; the person who has died goes to the place determined by his own Karman, the person who accompanies him on the funeral pyre goes to the hell reserved for those who are guilty of the sin of suicide. On the other hand, by surviving the deceased, one can do much good both to oneself and to the departed by offering prescribed oblations for his happiness in the other world. By dying with him one can do good to neither."⁹⁴

It is clear that Bana was struck with horror by the tendency to eulogise the *sati* custom, shown in some quarters in his days, and was anxious to offer the most determined opposition to it. Tantra writers also joined him in the crusade. The Tantrics, as is well known, hold not only women but the female principle in high esteem. The Mahanirvan Tantrics prescribe a whole day's fast for a man who speaks rudely to his wife

91. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-50

92. Banabhatta's *Kadambari* (tr. by C.M. Ridding), pp.135-36

93. *Kadambari*, paragraph 177, part 1 (Kane ed.)

94. यदेतदनुमरणं नाम तदतिनिष्फलम् । अविद्वज्जनाचरित एष मार्गः । मोहविलासितमेतद्भ्रमसाचरितमिदं यदुपरते पितरि भर्तारि भ्रातरि वा प्राणाः परित्यज्यन्ते । स्वयं चेन्न जहति ह परित्याज्याः । उपरतस्य तु न कर्मणि गुणमावहति । न तावदुस्यायं शुभलोकोपार्जनहेतुः न निरयपातप्रतिकारः, न परस्परसमागमनिमित्तम् । अन्यामेव स्वकर्मफलपाकोपचितामसौ अवशो नीयते भुमिम् । असावपि आत्मघातिनः केवलमेनसा संयुज्यते । जीवंस्तु जलाज्जलिदानादिना बहूपकरोत्युपरतस्यात्मनश्च मृतस्तु नोभयस्यापि ।

Kadambari, Purvardha, p.308.

and enjoins the education of girls before their marriage.⁹⁵ In fact, *Sakta Tantra*, put a ban on such practices as *sati*. It was pointed out that a woman was the embodiment of the Supreme Goddess and boldly declared that if a person burnt her with her husband, he would be condemned to eternal hell.⁹⁶ This contradiction of the *ksatriya* ethic has its own interest as a statement of opposition particularly as it comes from those who were initially regarded as being of lesser status but constituting the larger percentage of population. Possibly this kind of opposition nurtured the compensatory notion of a *sati* being converted into a goddess, a notion which seems to have gained currency in the later second millennium A.D. Madri in the Mahabharata for instance, is not deified.

Some of our predecessors dared to speak and act against the custom of *sati*. The Mughal Emperor Akbar rode day and night to prevent *sati* of a princess of Jodhpur. Akbar's comment in the *Ain-i- Akbari* of Abdul Fazl, where the enlightened Emperor was reported to have had remarked: "It is a strange commentary on the magnanimity of men that they should seek their deliverance through the sacrifice of their wives." This comment may have been made after the Emperor heard that on the funeral pyre of his own favoured commander-in-chief, Raja Man Singh, who died a natural death in the Deccan in 1614, sixty of his 1500 wives and concubines were co-cremated with the General.

5.5 GROWING POPULARITY OF SATI

However, the fact that such condemnation of the custom of *sati* was silently passed over by the socio-religious establishment of the time shows how active the promoters of *sati* were in constructing a supporting ideology from a selective reading of the sources of the Hindu belief system. Thus in spite of a tirade against the practice of *sati*, it continued to gain in popularity especially among the *ksatriya* classes. The Scythian influence (c. 150 B.C.- 250 A.D.) further added fuel to the fire. *Sati* was first fostered among the *ksatriyas* but was later adopted by the *brahmins*. Ascetic ideals were gaining the upper hand in society; the conduct of a widow boldly burning herself with the remains of her husband appeared to it as the most glorious example of supreme self sacrifice. The theory of *karman* was also modified so as to support the *sati* custom. It was stipulated that

⁹⁵. Arvind Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁹⁶. Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

the merit of the *sati*'s self- sacrifice was more than sufficient to annihilate her husband's sins and raise him to heaven to live in eternal union with his wife.⁹⁷

Whenever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of morality emanates from its class interest and its feeling of class superiority. In social action there is first a habit or practice and then follows its justification. Thus religious authority is produced to enforce the merit of an act originating in a feeling of jealousy, pride, grief, despair or some other passion of the mind. So, the savage custom of *sati* adopted by the higher classes and commended by the *brahmins* acquired religious sanctity in public eye in the course of time.⁹⁸ The priestly class used the few examples of *sati* in the *Mahabharata* to impress among the people the religious merit of the practice. Literary men were not found wanting in supporting these views by interpolations and inventions under the name of traditions from the *Puranas* and *Tantras*.⁹⁹

But even though *sati* was not unanimously sanctioned by the ancient law-givers, advocates of the custom of *sati* came forward in increasing numbers from around the 7th century A.D. onwards, extolling it as the highest act of virtue for a widow. From this period onwards, we find many fiery advocates of *sati* like Angiras, Harita, Vishnu and Mitakshara, who were subsequently quoted by the supporters of the custom of *sati*, recommending strongly the practice on the grounds of divine bliss and reunion of souls. Sankha, Angirasa, Harita and others emphasized that innumerable merits flow from the performance of *sati*. According to Harita: "That woman who follows her husband in death purifies three families, viz., of her mother, of her father and of her husband."¹⁰⁰ According to Shankha, a woman who follows her husband after his death dwells in heaven for as many years as there are hairs on a human body. Angiras argued that the only course which religion prescribed for a widow was that of *sati*.¹⁰¹ A passage interpolated in *Parasarasmruti* observes that just as a snake-charmer forcibly drags out a snake from a hole by force, in the same manner the *sati* takes out her husband from hell and enjoys heaven with him for three and a half crores of years.¹⁰² But there were other

⁹⁷. *Ibid.*, p.125.

⁹⁸. V.N. Datta –*Sati- Widow Burning In India*, Manohar Books, New Delhi, 1988, p. 6.

⁹⁹. *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹⁰⁰. Quoted in *Mitaksara on Yajnavalkya-smriti*, I. 86

¹⁰¹. Quoted by Apararka on *Yajnavalkya*, I. 87

¹⁰². ब्रह्मघ्नं वा सुरापं वा कुतश्च वापि मानवम् । यमादाय मृता नारी सा भर्तारं पुनरिति हि ॥ *Vridhdharita* 201.

commentators, who were strongly opposed to this custom. That Medhatithi felt it necessary to comment forcefully on *sati* whereas Manu does not even refer to it, indicates its wider prevalence during the later period. Nevertheless there are also inscriptions from these times which record widows from royal families donating property to religious beneficiaries.

The views advocated by these writers gradually began to produce some effects on society. During the period 700-1100 A.D., *satis* became more frequent in northern India and quite common in Kashmir. The history of Kashmir, during this period teems with the cases of *satis* in royal families. Kalhana, the historian of the province, is surprised to find that even notoriously unchaste queens like Jayamati, the wife of King Uchchala, should be seen immolating themselves on their husband's funeral pyres.¹⁰³ The custom of *sati* was so deep-rooted in the ruling families of Kashmir that not only regularly married wives, but even concubines used to follow it. Kings Kalasa and Utkarsha were, for instance, followed both by their wives and concubines. (*Rajatarangini*, VII, 858). It seems that the principle of dying after a beloved relative was extended to relations other than the husband as well; we sometimes come across mothers, sisters and sisters-in-law burning themselves with the dead relation (*Ibid*, VI, 1380; VIII, 448, VII, 1486). Cases are also on record of ministers, servants and nurses burning themselves with their masters. (*Ibid*, V, 206; VII, 481; VII, 490; VIII, 1447). This reminds us of the *harikari* custom of Japan.¹⁰⁴ In the stories of the *Kathasaritsagara*, (which was written in c.1100 A.D. in Kashmir), the custom of *sati* is quite common. Its greater prevalence in the valley of Kashmir is probably due to its proximity to Central Asia, which was the home of the Scythians, among whom the custom was quite common.¹⁰⁵

There is evidence to show that outside Kashmir also the custom of *sati* and *anumarana* was getting gradually more popular in Northern India. A passage of the *Harsacharita* gives a beautiful poetic description of *anumarana*. Herein the glory of the moon-lotuses is 'said to be laughing like a woman intent on *anumarana* who is decked with ear- ornaments and wears garlands on her head.'¹⁰⁶ The mother of Harsha, Queen Yasomati did not care to wait till the death of her husband; when his case was pronounced

¹⁰³. Altekar -p. 127

¹⁰⁴. A.S. Altekar- *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹⁰⁵. *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁶. *Ucchvasa*, 5, (sixth para from the end): U.T. p. 142.

to be hopeless, she gave away her ornaments, took a bath, put on all the marks of a lady with her husband living (*avidhavamaranachihnamudvahanti*) and entered the funeral pyre. When her husband Prabhakaravardhana died, some of the royal officers, including the physician entered the fire.¹⁰⁷ The wife of Dahir, king of Sind, also became a *sati* when her husband was defeated and killed by Muhammad-bin-Kasim, the general of the Muslim ruler, Hajjaja, in the ninth century A.D.

It is interesting that there is little reference to the deification of the woman at this time. The incentive to become a *sati* is accompanied by a list of rewards for the woman. She will dwell in heaven for as many years as there are hairs on the human body and will dwell with her husband served by *apsaras*. Her act will purify of all sins, not only her husband but also her parents and of course herself. The inclusion of her parents was a shrewd move appealing to her filial emotions. The ultimate threat is that if she does not burn she will be reborn as a woman in many successive births. The package of rewards is based quite clearly on the *ksatriya* view of the after-life. Only the hero went to *Indraloka* and lived eternally in heaven. The other view of after-life, as developed in the theory of karma and *sansara*, action and rebirth, did not necessarily apply to the hero. Heaven for the hero is a paradise land. The notion of *sati* therefore is tied to the heroic ideal of the *ksatriya* and it is not surprising that up to this point in history it is not permitted to other castes and specifically not to *brahmin* women as is stated in the *Padma Purana*. It declares that any person, who will be guilty of helping a *brahmin* widow to the funeral pyre, will be guilty of the dreadful and unatoneable sin of the murder of a *brahmin* (*brahmahatya*).¹⁰⁸ But this was soon to change. In the early second millennium A.D. the *Mitakshara*, a legal text treating of family law, argued that all women be permitted to become *satis* and that *niyoga* be prohibited.

The *brahmin* community, however, was accustomed to pride itself on following the most ascetic and self-denying code of life; eventually it began to feel that it should not allow itself to be outdistanced by the *ksatriyas* in the custom of *sati*. The custom therefore began to be followed by a few *brahmin* families soon after 1000 A.D.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷. *Harshacharita*, Book V.

¹⁰⁸. *Srishtikhanda*, 49, 72-3.

¹⁰⁹. Altekar-op. cit., p. 129.

In other words, *sati* in its latest form was a medieval growth though it had its germs in ancient customs and rituals.

As the idea of deification of *sati* also developed it was said that the goddess entered the body of the woman when she resolved to become a *sati*. Deification was a compensation for suicide and acted as an incentive as well as an attempt to take the act onto another plane, where mundane considerations would not apply. But the deification was not individualised, for the women are not worshipped as goddesses in their own name but as part of the generalised *sati*-goddess. There was less emphasis now on the continuity of living with the husband after death in heaven. Was this due to non-*ksatriya* women, especially *brahmins* being encouraged to become *satis*?¹¹⁰

The literary evidence from the works of Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bana, Sudraka and Kalhana tends to show that the *sati* custom was getting gradually popular in the royal families of northern India during the period 200 to 1000 A.D. It is however strange that only a few epigraphic records from Northern India of this period should be referring to the actual cases of *sati*. Negative evidence is never conclusive, but it is only reasonable to expect that the court panegyrists would not have failed to mention the cases of *sati*, when they were eulogizing the kings and queens of their royal families. As it is, only a few epigraphs refer to *sati* cases even in Rajputana, which later became a stronghold of the *sati* custom. The earliest among these is that of the mother of the Chahamana king Chandamahāsena, who became a *sati* in 842 A.D. The next case is that of Sampalladevi, who became a *sati* at Ghatiyala in Rajputana in 890 A.D.¹¹¹ We have no other recorded cases of *sati* in Rajputana records prior to 1000 A.D. It may therefore be doubted whether the *sati* custom had become common even in the Rajput royal families of northern India before the 10th century. Kashmir is of course an exception.

The *sati* custom had however obtained the status of a well recognized but optional practice in Hinduism; for we find it traveling to the islands of Java, Sumatra and Bali along with the Hindu emigrants.

¹¹⁰. Romila Thapar- *op. cit.*, p.89.

¹¹¹. Altekar -*op.cit.*,p. 130.

By the 1st or 2nd century A.D., the custom had begun to gain the support of the lawgivers, while by the 7th century A.D. it was well established as a religious duty applicable to widows of all ages. Various factors have been identified as responsible for the growing legitimization of widow burning: deliberate mistranslation of the sacred texts by the *brahmins* and the difficulty of protecting women in times of war. Particularly in the Middle Ages with the decline of Buddhism and its rationalist-pacifist influence, and because of the contact with some tribal and other cognate cultures it came to be believed that comfort of a dead man in his after- life could be ensured by burying him with his wives, jewellery, slaves and other favourite possessions.¹¹² Though there are many popular stories about how courageously Hindu widows in the middle ages committed *Jauhar* or mass *sati*, there is, however, evidence also that it was not entirely a matter of courage and a strong element of compulsion persisted in such events.

From 700 A.D., fiery advocates of the custom of *sati*, such as Angirasa, Harita, Parasara etc. took up cudgels in favour of this practice with their new arguments and theories extolling this custom. As a result of such tendencies to eulogize and buttress *sati* as a noble religious practice worthy of emulation, crystallization of the practice of *sati* was more or less complete by the seventh century A.D. By then, the custom had come into general vogue though it was characterized by variations in the degree of its prevalence at different periods among the various regions as well as the different castes and social groups.

5.6 THE STATUS OF WIDOW AND RITE OF WIDOW-BURNING

The Deorala incident was able to invite the attention of social scientists, activists and leaders about the low status of widows in our society. This incident demonstrated that a woman's life in the present context as well as in the past, in itself had no value; a married woman lived for her husband alone, and self- immolation was the supreme ideal in the patriarchal society's religious and social beliefs.¹¹³

¹¹². Upendra Thakur- *The History of Suicide in India*, Delhi, Munshiram Manohar Lal, 1963, Quoted by Ashish Nandi, *At the Edge of Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1980, p.3.

¹¹³. *The Indian Express*, 4th October, 1987.

When her husband died a Hindu woman had theoretically two options. She could opt to remain a widow or she could perform *sati*. The widow was called *vidhava*, literally 'the one whose husband is gone, i.e. dead.' The word *sati* means literally a 'good woman'. The sense of this word, in fact, bestows superlative praise on the woman, as in the expression *sati parvati*, the best woman, Parvati. The word *sati* also referred conventionally to the act of *sati*, namely, the self-immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. The *vidhava* was considered to be unfortunate, even inauspicious (*asubha*). The *sati* by contrast, was viewed as fortunate and auspicious (*subha*).

The widow was often referred to as a wretched woman with a 'shattered fate' which implied that 'the pot of her fate' became as empty as her life without her husband and that there was no 'substance' to her life. She was as good as dead; and yet, she, the ogress, survived, her god (i.e. her husband) being dead. The widow was also held responsible for 'causing her husband's death'. Thus widowhood of a woman entailed spiritual misfortune for not only her but also the family, the lineage and the community all of whom shared the blame for this *adharma*.¹¹⁴

Within the framework of marriage, the aim of the widow was to seek reunion with her husband. Her option was, how to do this- immediately i.e. by committing *Sahamarana* or slowly i.e. by living out her life as a widow. The ultimate threat was that if she did not burn she will be reborn as a woman in many successive births. Obviously enough, the successive births as woman was the greatest curse in Hindu society, so the only way out of this rebirth cycle was to commit self-immolation. Thus the doctrine of *karma* which made woman responsible for her widowhood, and the concept of rebirth and the other world were also responsible for women's subordination in the society.

The *Sati* was an object of the highest veneration, and so was taken out to the accompaniment of music in a grand procession through the town to the cremation grounds. She was given a bath, and then she put on her person all the insignia of *saubhagya* or married bliss.¹¹⁵ She used to carry with her *kumkuma*, mirror, comb and betel leaves which were the insignia of *saubhagya*. Very often she used to give away her

¹¹⁴. Arvind Sharma- *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹¹⁵. स्नानं मंगलसंस्कारो भूषणाञ्जनधारणम् । गन्धपुष्पं तथा धूपं हरिद्राक्षतधारणम् ॥
मंगलं च तथा सूत्रं पादालवतकमेव च । शवत्या दानं प्रियोवित्तश्च प्रसन्नास्यत्वमेव च ॥
नातामंगलवाद्यानां श्रवणं गीतकस्य च । कूर्यादथ स्वकां भूषां विप्राय प्रतिपादयेत् ॥

Padmapurana, Patalakhanda, 102, 67 ff.

ornaments and belongings to her friends and relations, who used to keep them as sacred mementos. Then she used to take final leave of her relations. Ascending the funeral pyre, she used to place her husband's head on her lap. Then the pyre was lighted.

The self-cremation of the *sati* was apparently one of the most fortunate and auspicious events for the *sati* herself and for those who witnessed this supposedly rare expression of spirituality. It was as though *sati* were an event of spiritual and cosmic significance. For the woman who opted for *sati*, *sati* was like the performance of an especially solemn religious ceremony. Ideally, her decision was immediate and without deliberation.

She herself calmly ordered the preliminaries of the *sati* rite and donned her bridal sari. Though others could implore her to reconsider her decision, especially for the sake of her children, she did not seem to hear them. She benevolently blessed them. She did not shed even a tear, even though great lamentation may surround her, for she looked upon this moment as the most auspicious of her life. This was the supreme opportunity for self-sacrifice that consummated her life of dedication to her husband. As if departing on a joyous journey she prostrated herself before the elders and asked for their blessings. They then generously blessed her and, reversing the usual norms of respect, prostrated themselves to her in return: they looked upon her as the goddess incarnate. As she led the procession to the cremation ground, where the corpse of her husband was waiting cremation, she was joined by the people of the village, who came to witness the awesome moment. After the performance of the preliminary rites, she bid final farewell with folded hands (*pranamanjali*). With perfect tranquility, she climbed the ladder, sat down on the pyre and tenderly took her husband's head on her lap. Optionally she could recline beside him. Even when the flames reached her, she maintained her composure. The crowd acclaimed her as a good wife, a true *sati*, one who had brought immense dignity and honour to herself, her family, and the community.....they also expressed gratitude that they themselves had a chance to witness this noble sacrifice. This was the ideal *sati*, the woman and her act. (Hejib and Young, 1978 b).

After the death of her husband, the survival of widow was made, if not impossible, then difficult enough through the imposition of various rules and regulations about her lifestyle and her social seclusion and humiliation. The decision of self-

immolation by a widow does not seem to be a disputable fact given the hard life she had to lead, and in the face of the ostensible lack of self- respect, self- immolation might have seemed the better of two options. It has been reported that once a decision of self-immolation was taken by the widow, she could not change her mind and the force used after the formal declaration was viewed as help to hold her to her intention rather than forcing her to perform *sati*.¹¹⁶ Thus, the ideal of married womanhood degenerated in the forceful burning of the widow and it was also treated as an integral part of *sati*.

It should be noted that the status of widow and frequency of widow burning were inversely related. Widows had to pay the price for the purity of caste in the patriarchal set-up. Practices such as pre-pubertal marriage of females, Kulinism and the associated hypergamy and polygamy, and the injunction against widow- remarriage are all based on the concern for the purity of women.¹¹⁷ The development of a social hierarchy based on the notion of relative purity has had a doubly unfortunate effect on the lives of Hindu women. The widow's position in Hindu caste society was ambiguous although alive, her clan identification with her deceased husband meant that she was socially dead, subsumed in her relationship with him and highly polluted. The fire which consumed her body purified her and transported her essence to this other domain.¹¹⁸ The link established between the husband's linkage - the sacrificing community, and the domain of the Gods is one of purity. The widow extremely polluted by her husband's death, through sacrifice was transformed and became *Sat* or pure, establishing a link which we can encapsulate as purity, between the world of the living kin of her husband, and the domain of the Gods, and their devoted wives, and her own personal *Siva*- like God, her husband.¹¹⁹

5.7 RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF SATI

To try and understand what was Hindu about *sati*, for stripped of the adjective Hindu, *sati* was nothing but a suicidal act or homicide. To put it simply, the woman who performed *sati* was viewed as the *ideal Hindu* woman. To do justice to the phenomenon,

¹¹⁶. Arvind Sharma - *op. cit.*, p.84.

¹¹⁷. Elizabeth Leigh Strutchbury- 'Blood, fire and mediation: Human sacrifices and widow-burning in nineteenth century in India' in Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), *Women in India and Nepal*, Australian National University, 1982, p. 37

¹¹⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹¹⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

it is important to analyse the religious dimension of *sati*, for only then can we understand the correct implication of *sati*.

To understand *sati*, one must also understand the Hindu widow. Though they represented apparently polar images in one that was auspicious and the other inauspicious, they shared a deep structure. This will, in turn help us determine how women acted in a Hindu way according to proleptic models passed on by the tradition.

A Hindu woman was brought up to be a good woman by the patriarchal society, a *sati* in the literal sense of the word. As a responsible member of Hindu society she was to conform to the protocols of Hindu *dharma*. Her special dharma as a woman (*stri-dharma*) may be characterized as union with the husband. Her 'goodness' to her husband was central to the definition of *stri-dharma*. For a Hindu woman, the husband became the *sine qua non* of her existence.¹²⁰ She believed that her single-pointed concentration and acts of austerity performed for her husband (*pati*) procured good merit (*punya*), which would ensure her husband's longevity and prosperity. Due to this orientation she felt that she was responsible if her husband died before her. She thought that she was lacking in her *dharmaic* quality, her goodness, i.e. her *satitva*, if her husband died. Consequently, irrespective of his age and the circumstances of his death, she interpreted the event as indicative of her own karmic failure. Shock, grief and guilt therefore characterized her response to his death. With her god departed she truly became *vidhava*, without fortune. Her immediate act was to undergo religious expiation, whether voluntary or socially imposed, so that she ensured her reunion with her husband in her next birth, or for seven lives to come.¹²¹

She was expected to become a *tapasvini*, an ascetic woman in order to regenerate her *satitva*, womanly goodness. It was as though she were undertaking a *sadhana*, a yogic discipline, in order to emerge like a *yogini* with single-pointed concentration on her husband and on her discipline directed towards reunion with him in his next birth. The widow gradually largely overcame the inauspiciousness of widowhood though *sati* enjoyed much more esteemed, honoured and respected as she was viewed as a perfect wife, the very embodiment of the goddess.

¹²⁰ Arvind Sharma-*Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1988, p.77.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p. 77-78.

5.8 WIDOW-SATI

Comparing the images of the widow and the *sati*, we note certain parallels. Just as the widow was anxious to reunite with her husband, so was the *sati*. The widow developed perfect discipline (yoga) in her austerities, so too the *sati* exercised yogic control in her act of *sati*. The *sati* burned away all her bad *karma* by entering the fire; she became purified and produced good *karma* for the next life. Her equanimity expressed in her decision to perform *sati* and her courage at the moment of *sati* revealed her yogic fortitude. Her act was said to radiate benevolence, not only on the family and those present, but on the generations to come. Thus both the widow and the *sati* were said to perform *tapas*.

But there remained some points of difference. From the moment of her decision the *sati* was considered auspicious. The widow from the moment of her husband's death became inauspicious. This difference in their status lay in their respective reactions to their husband's death. Upon the knowledge of her husband's death, the *sati* immediately announced her intentions of instant reunion with him. The *sati* never had the title of widow due to the immediacy of her self-imposed death. Rather she donned her wedding garments and thereby reaffirmed symbolically her marital status and auspiciousness. Everyone in the village gathered to witness the *sati*'s holiness, whereas everyone avoided the sight of the widow.

The *sati* was viewed as a perfect wife, the very embodiment of the goddess, for she expedited immediately her bad *karma* that caused the husband's death. The widow, by contrast, thought of herself and her own life; hence she had to use the hiatus between his death and her for the metamorphosis back to being a good wife (*sati*). Moreover, the act of *sati* ensured that the couple would be reunited in heaven, while widowhood left open the destination (earth, heaven or hell?). In other words, while clarity regarding the result of her actions graced the *sati*, ambiguity tormented the widow. Moreover, the *sati* generated so much merit through her self-sacrifice that not only her husband but she too attained heaven after death.

My purpose here was to restore the religious dimension to the description and interpretation of the proleptic models of the Hindu widow and *sati*. The religious

categories of *stri-dharma*, auspiciousness (*subha*), and inauspiciousness (*asubha*) were central to this enterprise, for they were used by the patriarchal tradition itself. Thus, an analysis of the deep structure of the proleptic models of the Hindu widow and *sati*, however, revealed a hidden dimension: yoga.

We are aware that the Hindu widow and *sati* themselves were not conscious of the yogic dimension of their life. They would not have technically identified themselves as *yogini*. Their domestic ideals and rebirth orientation precluded their appropriation of the concept of yoga in its technical, conventional sense of the religious discipline for, and goal of liberation (*moksa*). However, we found that the psychology of yoga was indeed instilled, albeit inadvertently, in the traditional Hindu woman. This becomes evident in the concept of *tapasvini*, the word that describes literally and figuratively the Hindu widow just as the word *tapasvi* describes the *yogi*.

From a critical perspective, we find that the male *yogi* and the female *yogini* as *sati* and *vidhava* are different in ways not apparent in the above discussion. A man had real freedom of choice whether to become a *yogi* or not. A woman on the other hand did not have many choices. If her husband died first: she wished to be reunited with him. Her only option was how to do this: immediately by *sati* or slowly by living out her life as a widow (no remarriage was possible); moreover, her yogic- like spirituality was rarely recognized for people were unaware of the deep structures and remained content to view women's domestic religion as lower, albeit appreciated, than the male's ultimate goal of renunciation of the family and liberation from the cycles of rebirth. Furthermore, in the case of the *sati*, her option to join her husband through self- immolation was supposed to be her own, though it can be argued that the proleptic model instilled in her from childhood was the patriarchal society's or family's choice, not truly hers. Given the hard life of a widow and the ostensible lack of respect, *sati* may have seemed the better of the two options, an escape from hardship. In some cases *sati* was more involuntary than voluntary.

We have two understandings of the proleptic model of the Hindu widow and the *sati*. The first is situated in the organic milieu of traditional Hinduism; the second is situated in a modern perspective informed by history, psychology, sociology and feminism. It is difficult to sustain these two perspectives simultaneously but perhaps a

stereoscopic vision from the traditional and modern 'lenses' will emerge and help us comprehend why the meaning of the models of the Hindu widow and *sati* is more complex than may be immediately apparent.

5.9 WAS FORCE EXERCISED?

Was any force exercised to compel unwilling widows to mount the funeral pyres? A straight reply like a 'yes' or 'no' cannot be given to this question. There can be no doubt that in many cases unwilling widows were forced to burn themselves. Theoretically speaking, widow burning was supposed to be a voluntary decision of the widow and it was always 'self-immolation'; but in practice it was not so. Widows were being drugged, tied to the bodies of their husbands, and forced down with bamboo sticks on the burning pyres. The duress exerted on the prospective *sati* was seen as a test of the piety of a family. Taking advantage of the social sanction, the practitioners of the rite were most ruthless with the widow who after taking the fatal decision to commit *sati*, later wavered.¹²² It has also been suggested that the life of a widow was made miserable. She was insulted and humiliated, she was not allowed to attend festive and religious occasions and there were severe restrictions on her food and dress.

The *brahmins* also played a crucial role in popularizing the practice. They claimed sacred sanction for widow burning. Indeed *sati* was seen by many observers of Indian society as a conspiracy of *brahmins*, as they tried to misguide the widow by glorifying the act of self-sacrifice by her.¹²³ The *brahmins* were motivated by worldly profit. For them, *sati* could be a profitable source of income, more so, if it occurred in rich families. The *Rajatarangini* noted that when Bijjale, the queen, entered the fire, the relic-seekers begging for ornaments, looted her and caused hurt to her limbs.¹²⁴ Abbe J. Dubois who has provided most comprehensive account of the Hindus in South India in the eighteenth century, wrote similarly about the *brahmins*:

¹²². Elizabeth Leigh Strutchbury: 'Blood, Fire and Mediation: Human Sacrifice and Widow Burning in Nineteenth Century India' in Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), *Women in India and Nepal*, Australian National University, 1982, p. 37.

¹²³. Ashish Nandy, *op. cit.*, p.6.

¹²⁴. Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, *op. cit.*, VIII, p. 363.

"The most inexhaustible mine of wealth to Brahmins is their religion. As chief priests, they exercise the highest functions and consequently almost all the profit."¹²⁵

It is evident that the use of force and coercion had reached its heights in widow burning during this period. Voluntary self-immolation was literally transformed into social murder in which relatives of the widow, kinship group, community and even the *brahmin* priest all played a crucial role. If they had not participated willingly, this social evil would not have occurred on such a gigantic scale. In practice, most unwarrantable means were used to give the incident the appearance of a voluntary act, even though the woman concerned neither intended nor consented to self-immolation.

To understand how and why a woman burnt herself it is necessary to reconstruct the circumstances under which she was rushed to the pyre. In the atmosphere of gloom all around, the widow, stricken with grief, was in a stupor. She had no time to think. On this occasion, the family members, the *brahmins* and the crowd assembled to organize the show. Consent was extracted from the widow in unguarded moments when she was dazed with sorrow and grief. Everybody was in a great hurry to finish off the act. The widow got no time for reflection.¹²⁶

Opium, *bhang*, betel and other narcotics which possess the property of dulling her senses and making her comparatively insensible to her misery were administered to the widow. All this put her in a state of distraction and stupefaction and she was pushed on to the pyre. The use of force by means of bamboos was common in Bengal.¹²⁷

Kalhana has recorded the cases of two Kashmir queens bribing their ministers in order to induce them to come to the cremation ground for dissuading them from their apparently voluntary resolution to accompany their departed husbands. Queen Didda adopted this stratagem and was saved by her minister Naravahana. (VI, 195). Garga, the wily minister of Queen Jayamati, had a fiendish heart; he took the bribe all right, but deliberately delayed going to the cremation ground. The poor queen had to allow herself

¹²⁵. Abbe Dubois- p. 295.

¹²⁶. V.N. Datta- *Sati, op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹²⁷. *Ibid.*

to be burnt in pursuance of her so- called voluntary resolve (VIII, 363).Medieval travellers record many cases of force being exercised, and their accounts must be true at least in some cases. Manucci tells us that *ksatriya* women were burnt even against their wishes, (III ,p. 65); he himself rescued one such woman, who was eventually married to a European friend of his.¹²⁸

Even widows intensely anxious to follow their husbands were likely to recoil and jump out under the agony of the flames of fire. They were then regarded as untouchables and were not accepted back by their castes and families. So, special funeral arrangements were made in the case of a *sati*. The funeral pyre was piled in a deep pit in many parts of the country, especially in the Deccan and Western India. This rendered an escape impossible. A Mysore inscription refers to a lady going out to become a *sati* as going forth to the fire pit to die.¹²⁹ Much later, Barbosa has also referred to this method. In Gujarat and northern U.P., a wooden house, about 12 feet square, was constructed and the widow was tied to one of its pillars. In Bengal, the widow's feet were tied to posts fixed into the ground; she was thrice asked whether she really wished to go to heaven, and then the pyre was lighted. Where burial was practiced, the widow was interred along with her husband. This was the case in Andhra province in the 16th century.¹³⁰ Later on, sometimes they were rescued by European traders, who used to marry them. It is a pity that in spite of such instances, society should not have realized the enormous inequity of the custom.

Otherwise also the free will of a widow in a patriarchal Hindu society was beyond imagination, since free will implies the will of a free person, while the Hindu widow was hardly a free person. She was dependant and guided by others – throughout her life. When she could not take a single independent decision in her life, how could it be assumed that the decision of self- immolation was her voluntary decision? Pressures from relatives and *brahmin* priests were responsible in the encouragement of *sati*, being fully aware that she, a widow would be a burden on the family.¹³¹ It can be said that widow burning cannot be assigned exclusively to one or the other factor .It may be concluded that whenever some of these factors dominate, the frequency of such crimes against women is likely to increase.

¹²⁸ . Altekars- *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹²⁹ . (E.C., Vol. IV,2, Hg. No. 18).

¹³⁰ . Altekars- *op.cit.*, p. 134.

¹³¹ . Ajit Kumar Ray- *Widows are not for Burning*, ABC Publishing House, 1985, p. 14.

The practice of widow burning, sanctified by a long tradition and encouraged by *brahmins*, was established firmly and became an integral part of the Hindu social system in the medieval period.¹³² The practice of widow burning grew out of a social system rather than scriptural support, and the patriarchal social system proved stronger than scriptural support in context of widow burning. Once the practice took roots it was not difficult to find commentators and digest writers to justify the rituals on the basis of past examples. Thus, vested interests of dominating forces tried to cast the custom of widow burning¹³³ in a religious mould.

This is not to deny that, on rare occasions, it may have been an act of genuine grief and the desire to follow a husband into death. There were however, cases of widows becoming *satis* of their own free will. The average *Rajput* or *ksatriya* lady ascended the funeral pyre with the same reckless courage with which her husband used to embrace death on the battle-field, when leading a forlorn hope against very heavy odds. Grown up widows like the mother of King Harsha would feel that the purpose of their lives was over, that they had nothing more to achieve or enjoy, and that it was therefore in the fitness of things that they should accompany their beloved spouses. It is probable that in some cases, the force of public opinion may have been felt to be too strong. Furthermore it can only be an act of self- sacrifice if it is not enforced.

Many of the widows, who terminated their lives on their husband's funeral pyres, did so out of genuine love and devotion to their husbands whom they revered as God. They believed that the course they were following was in the best spiritual interest both of themselves and their husbands. A stern sense of duty, a stoical contempt of physical pain, and the hope of an eternal union with their beloved husbands in heaven sustained them through the terrible ordeal on the burning pyre. Naturally, society held them in reverence and immortalized their memory by suitable memorials, as it does in the case of heroes who deliberately and cheerfully sacrifice their lives in the cause of their religion or mother-land out of a sense of duty and patriotism, often after undergoing long and excruciating pain on the dismal and desolate battlefield.

¹³² V.N. Dutta, *op. cit.*, p.9.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

5.10 FACTORS FOR THE GROWTH OF SATI

According to P.V. Kane, widow burning was not, in historic times, a practice imposed by priests or men on unwilling women. It somehow grew and it is improper to say that men imposed it on women. It may be that examples of *sati* occurred because of force of popular sentiment.¹³⁴ However, Romila Thapar views the introduction of widow-burning, apart from other things, as a deliberate subordination of women, who had earlier played an important role. Though the practice of widow burning existed in ancient societies in one or the other form, there is no other society where it was practiced by variant social groups for different reasons at various points of time and where the controversy over whether or not it should be practiced was so clearly articulated over many centuries and though the decision of widow-burning was maintained to be the free will of the widow but its practice was largely doubtful. As a ritual, it was most traumatic in underlining the subordination of women.¹³⁵ Thapar views its emergence as a reaction against the many growing socio-religious movements some of which disapproved of caste differentiations and supported the continuing participation of women in social roles whether as wives or widows, and which movements were not always regarded with favour by the upper castes. The immolation of widows may have been seen as a method of demarcating status.¹³⁶

We are faced with the crucial question as to how did the practice of *sati* originate and how did it persist throughout the centuries? What is it that impelled a woman to die on the funeral pyre? Was it inspiration, a religious duty, a divine ordinance, a social coercion or genuine fondness for her deceased companion? Could she decide independently? How many women could appreciate the philosophical justification of the rite, the fusion of the body and soul or the whole complex of ideas of the transmigration of soul? It is difficult to trace the origin of the custom of self-immolation of widows. Several theories have been put forward by the scholars in this regard. However, the fact remains that the growth of this horrendous practice cannot be explained through a single approach as the interaction and interplay of multifarious factors contributed to the

¹³⁴. P.V. Kane, *op. cit.*, p.630.

¹³⁵. Romila Thapar, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹³⁶. *Ibid.*

development of the custom of *sati*. The motives in the burning of women were so mixed that it is not possible to make a categorical statement which of them were more important than others - as an answer to the question why women committed *sati*. The growth of the custom of the *sati* was helped by several factors, such as the increasing adherence to the concept of strict morality, the growing trend against widow remarriage, the deterioration in the condition of widow, the influence of the invading warrior groups such as the Scythians, the growing advocacy and glorification of the custom, and the economic motives. Hence if *sati* is to be properly understood, it would require a tracking down of information on widow self immolation involving a number of sources, pertaining to a range of social groups and with reference to various regions at different points in time. Only when we examine the combination of factors like kinship, property relations, rights of inheritance, the general condition of the widows, the social approach to sexuality, the ethical parameters of the society and so on, will we begin to be aware of why and how women were encouraged or forced to become *satis*.

To begin with, to understand the reason and factors for the rise of the custom of *sati*, it is necessary to understand the life, condition and status of the Hindu widow. From around 300 BC, the position of the widow is marked by a distinct deterioration, and increasing restriction of and control over women's lives become evident from around this period. The earliest indication pertaining to the custom of *sati* too emerges from around this period. The fact that *sati* is not mentioned in the earliest religious texts and is referred to occasionally in the later literature leading up to the Christian era is supported by historical information that trails the first instance of *sati* only back to the fourth century B.C. Such a chronology also reflects and synchronizes with the trends related to the changing status of women in Indian society. Although the characterization of the Vedic age between 1700 and 500 B.C. as a "golden age for women" is not without pitfalls, the decline in their status and overall condition in the centuries thereafter is hardly a matter of dispute. Thus with time, Hindu patriarchal society became more and more elaborately structured, and women's lives became repressively constrained in more than one way. The unsympathetic attitude of society towards the widow-remarriage which had a Vedic sanction threw women into further constraints. In the *Visnu Smriti*, we come across two alternatives open to a widow - strict celibacy or self-immolation. With the deterioration in the position and condition of women from around 300 BC, restrictions were imposed on the widow's food and dress, behaviour and disposition. Thus upon her husband's death, a

widow had to perforce adopt and follow the harsh model of behaviour as laid down by the society, which deprived her of any opportunity for social privileges, religious rites, economic well being and, of course, entertainment or pleasure (*bhoga*) of any sort. In other words, a widow was regarded as a marginal entity in society as she was thought to have reached a stage sometimes termed as “cold sati”. She suffered from social ostracism and was considered a bad omen. She was treated by the family and the rest of the society as inauspicious, unclean and polluting, and her marginality was enforced by all kinds of taboos. These degrading and demeaning restrictions were imposed on the hapless widows in the guise of upholding the ideal of *dharma* and renunciation. The prescribed rigours of celibacy and austerities were so hard that they proved to be beyond the capacity of many. Those who pulled through the ordeal were reduced to social insignificance, contempt and humiliation.

Moreover for a widow, an alternative to a life of marginal existence and symbolic death that was made more precarious for many by advancing age and poverty, self immolation as an act of ritual suicide was a rather preferable option that terminated their “after lives” of certain misery as widows. Thus if we take into account the unrelieved harsh regimen of a widow’s life, her pathetic and hapless condition and the blot of inauspiciousness which entailed her social existence, it is not altogether surprising that some widows should have chosen *sati* as a way out. The agony of a few minutes on the pyre was probably a less painful experience than the long torture of mind and body during widowhood.

Ananda Coomaraswamy states that the rite of *sati* was not imposed by man but was voluntary.¹³⁷ He does not substantiate his contention but the grim fate of a Hindu widow would make such a voluntary decision credible in many cases.

The rite of *sati* originated in the upper strata of society - the kings, nobles and the aristocracy. The burning of women was a point of honour and was supposed to add to the splendour of the funeral ceremony. It also served as an example for others to follow. The digest writers and commentators were not found wanting in providing a justification of the practice on religious and moral grounds. Fighting was common among the early

¹³⁷. Ananda Coomaraswamy-*The Dance of Siva*, Noonday Press, sNew York, 1971.

tribes and the vanquished suffered greatly in warfare. To save themselves from falling into the clutches of the victors, women preferred to die on the funeral pyre to save their honour. In medieval times, *Rajput* ladies practised *Jauhar* to protect their honour. Once a custom takes root, it becomes a part of social order. With the passage of time the Brahmins also adopted *sati*, though several Hindu digest-writers had disapproved of the practice among Brahmin wives.¹³⁸

Sati was not a prescribed duty. Had it been so it would have been binding on all. Coomaraswamy touches on the spiritual significance of *sati* which he regards as a sublime sacrifice. Another writer who has studied *sati* from a sociological angle has expressed views similar to Coomaraswamy's insistence on the spiritual significance of the rite.¹³⁹ She observes that a widow is polluting in Hindu society and is transformed through sacrifice and becomes *sati* or pure bridging the gap between her husband's lineage and the domain of the gods.¹⁴⁰ According to her, women were socially dead after the death of their husbands and were thought to be polluting; hence their concern for purity.¹⁴¹

The question is whether while committing *sati*, women were conscious of the spiritual significance of the act. Were they motivated by the desire to win heaven, to unite themselves with their husbands in paradise, to rescue them from hell and to bring about the spiritual welfare of their husbands and of their own? It is difficult to say whether a woman committing *sati* had such lofty ideas. Even if she had any such ideas she would not share them with others except, of course, when she is like the inflexible mother of Prince Harsha. It was often mentioned that the husband was waiting with great anxiety for the sacrifice which shall restore the widow to him, deliver her from the exploitation of her sons and relatives and crown her with a martyr's halo. To what extent such popular beliefs persuaded a woman to commit *sati* is difficult to say.

The growth of the practice of *sati* was not only conditioned by the economic and social circumstances of widows but was also by the growing advocacy and

¹³⁸. Kane, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, Part I, p. 627.

¹³⁹. Elizabeth Leigh Struchbury- 'Blood Fire and Meditation: Sacrificing and Widow Burning in Nineteenth Century' in *Women in India and Nepal* (ed. Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee), p. 64.

¹⁴⁰. *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

glorification of the custom. As discussed above, close scrutiny of the source materials makes it crystal clear that there was no early religious sanction to the custom of *Sati*, as sought to be postulated by many of the self-seeking theologians. However, to a custom that arose out of socio-economic circumstances, a veneer of moral value and religious sanction was superimposed by some of the self-serving theologians for its wider propagation. The process was accelerated by public encouragement. The performance of *sati* was extolled to the point of divinity and was looked upon as an auspicious event of spiritual and cosmic significance, not only for the *sati* herself but also for her family as also those who witnessed this solemn expression of spirituality. Thus even though the practice of *sati* was not enjoined upon by the Hindu code, a general notion was made to strike root that it had strong scriptural support. Many commentators and digest-writers came forward to justify it by citing examples from the past as a model of emulation for the later generations. Vested interests thus strived to buoy up the practice of *sati* and make it gain credibility and wider acceptability by casting it in a religious mould. A popular story, represented as a sort of divine example and constantly held up for emulation to the widows, was connected with the story of dishonour of Lord Shiva by Daksha and the self-immolation by his divine consort Sati, who offers a model of wifely devotion. Sati was thus taken up for the sake of the *pativrata* ideals. The *Hitopadesha*, a collection of stories dating to the early first millennium A.D., glorifies the act of becoming a *sati* with the theory that it ensures for the wife and the husband an eternity of loving together after death. The jurists, the *Puranas* and the *Smriti* and literary men were not found wanting in their sustained promotion and glorification of the custom of *sati*. Many of them were rather vehement and unabashed in their tirade as they advocated the custom. For instance, Parasara aggressively asserted that the widow's immolation, even if not voluntary, would ensure a permanent berth for the couple in heaven. The practice was simultaneously swathed with the cloak of religious merit. Angirasa was more specific and he ordained that the only course which religion has prescribed for a widow is that of a widow is that of the *sati*. Such advocates of the custom of *sati* thus sought to attach religious merit to *sati* because stripped of the religious dimension *sati* was nothing but a suicidal act or homicide.

In social action, there is first a habit or practice and then follows its justification. Thus religious authority is produced to enforce the merit of an act originating in any kind of circumstances and against any background. So, the savage

custom of *sati* adopted by the higher classes and commended by the *brahmins* and patriarchal society acquired religious sanctity in public eye in the course of time. Thus, growing tributes and eulogy to the virtue of becoming *sati* escalated by leaps and bonds and ideological indoctrination led a vast number of men and women to believe in the moral and spiritual transformative power of *sati*. The jurists and lawmakers encouraged women to commit *sati* by asserting that it was the only way to reach salvation for a woman. Wrapped up in the glamour of virtue and spirituality, *sati* was said to ensure salvation not only for the *sati* herself but also for the families of her husband and her father going back seven generations. Women were praised for their courage and chastity which guided them to embrace their deceased husbands and enter their funeral pyres. Women thus became a victim of her own illusions of the *sati*hood. Thus, the option of becoming a *sati* was not only conditioned by their economic and social circumstances but also by the “virtue” they earned in gaining long-term spiritual rewards for themselves and their families, the prospect of better world hereafter and by the deliverance they attained from their life of marginal and pathetic existence and symbolic death as well as the economic deprivation faced by the widow. Interplay of several factors thus crated a psychological state whereby the institution of *sati* became acceptable to many widows. The willingness of a woman to burn herself alive thus prompted by the approbation of such an act by the then society or public opinion. Thus, the systematic glorification of the custom, promise of attainment of the heaven, the prospect of liberation of the husband from earthly sins and finally union with him in the other world and ultimate salvation collectively galvanized a widow to prefer self-immolation to a life of penury, humiliation and social marginalization. Aristobolus learnt on enquiry that the widows often volunteered for it. Those who refused were subjected to contempt. Nevertheless, the element of coercion either moral or physical was not uncommon.

At the same time, the economic motives and implications had a definite role in the growth of the system of *sati*. Although never clearly stated, there is hardly any doubt that its growth, among other things, was caused by the factors related to property rights and inheritance. Till 300 B.C., widow's right of inheritance of her husband's property was not recognized by any jurist nor did it have any Vedic sanction. The Vedic texts do not allow the women to inherit any property, let alone permit a widow to have any right to inherit the estate of her dead husband. There is not a single reference in the Vedic texts to any widow inheriting the property of her dead husband. The writers of *Dharmasutras*, the

earliest manual of the Indian law, opposed this idea. These ideas of the *Dharmasutras* were followed by the earliest *Smriti* writer, Manu. Such views were the natural consequence of the patriarchal form of the Vedic society where joint family system prevailed. The prevalence of the system of *niyoga* and widow remarriage minimized the need for any law of inheritance for widows. However, disfavour and gradual disappearance of widow remarriage and the custom of *niyoga* in the post-Vedic period led to the development of opinion in favour of widow's right of inheritance of her husband's property. It brought an evident change in the thinking of the society as also of the law-givers and opinion in favour of widow's inheritance right began to surface.

*Visnu-dharmasutra*¹⁴² (c. A.D. 100) is the first work to recognize a widow as the sole heir. It was a sensational step and the jurists differed. With Yajnavalkya, there arose a school of liberal thinkers who started raising their voice for the cause of widows, advocating for granting them some limited rights in the property of their husbands. Soon afterwards, Gautama made a plea to recognize the widow at least a co-heir with other male relatives of the deceased. The school of reformers was strengthened by the jurists and commentators like Brihaspati, Vardhamanu, Prajapati who furthered such ideas. The ideas championed by these advocates of the widow's rights were not only sensational for the society of that time; they also adversely affected the vested interests and therefore met with stiff resistance. The writers like Narada, Katyayana and King Bhoja of the Parmara dynasty strongly advocated the orthodox view and opposed the viewpoint of the liberal writers. Thus, the gradual development of the idea of the widow's right to property must have contributed to a greater emphasis on the custom of *sati* as the vested interests and the relatives craved for the elimination of a competitor for inheritance and wished to get rid of the widows in order to grab her property. The role that the ulterior motives must have played in this connection hardly requires an elaboration and there is no reason for us to believe that the male relatives of the widow's husband were merely swayed by the religious sentiments of the age to become an active party to the inhuman custom of burning the widow alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. Hence, what may have contributed to *sati* was the earnest craving to get rid of the prospect of inconvenient control which the widow could have over her husband's property.

¹⁴². *Visnudharmasutra*, XVII. 48

In the medieval period, Bengal was one of the regions which witnessed the largest number of *satis*. One plausible and apparent reason for this was the law of inheritance that was followed in Bengal which was the law prescribed in Jimutavahana's Dayabhaga, a commentary on *Yajnavalkyasmṛiti* by which widows could inherit their husband's property in full or in part. Because this provision meant disinheritance for other family members or the fragmentation of property, as well as empowerment of women, it clashed directly with the ethos and guiding principles of a patriarchal, predominantly agrarian society in which the splitting of land parcels could mean financial disaster for a family. In European history, the solution for this predicament was the reservation of property to the male line by entailment. It is worth noting that when there were no proprietary rights for widows there was neither eagerness nor the very idea of getting rid of them. However, with the gradual development of the idea of the widow's right to property, the emphasis on the custom of *sati* also increased till it was given the status of the "only *dharma*" for the widow. The family members in order to get rid of the widow appealed to her at a most distressing hour, to her devotion to and love for her husband.¹⁴³ We cannot miss out the irony that when woman had the right to live after the death of her husband, she was denied proprietary rights and when the latter was provided for, she was induced to die. It was not religious devotion which prompted the natives of Bengal but their worldly interest which many wished to serve under the cloak of religion. However, many other reasons are also identified as factors responsible for the high frequency of widow burning in Bengal.¹⁴⁴

It is interesting that during the second millennium A.D. when *brahmin* widows were permitted to become *satis*, this was also the time when *brahmin* property holders increased both in numbers owing to the land grants which they received from royalty. Thus what was in origin a custom associated with *ksatriya* notions of heroism and honour was now converted into a convenient way of eliminating an inheritor. It has been suggested that the largest occurrence was among *kulin brahmin* families for the ratio of male to female seems to have been severely out of balance, requiring that the *kulin* marry many wives from several families. The effect of this on the ritual of widow immolation was self-evident.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ P.V. Kane-*op.cit.*, p. 635.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁴⁵ Romila Thapar- *op. cit.*, p. 91.

From the foregoing discussion *sati* was an 'interest begotten prejudice' to use Jeremy Bentham's expression. It was a particular manifestation of the common tendency of man to make duty and virtue out of a course of action that is dictated in the first instance by his self-interest.¹⁴⁶

But the calculations went beyond the financial and economic motives. The trepidation and contempt for widows, caused by the enormity of the problems that they posed for the maintenance of male control, contributed to the growth of the practice of *sati*. A young and potentially sexually active widow was a considerable threat to the lineage's purity, besides becoming an economic responsibility.¹⁴⁷ There was the belief that an unattached woman without her husband constituted a grave danger to her community because of the supposedly irrepressible sexual powers she possessed. It was further believed that as the woman's wild and unruly sexual proclivities were potentially uncontrollable in the absence of husband, they always had the potential to disrupt a widow's ritually-prescribed life of austerity. Especially in the case of a young widow, there was always the risk of unwanted sexual entanglements. Not strangely, therefore, it was emphasized that a widow, highly inauspicious and polluting in the Brahminical social order, was transformed into the purest of wives, someone who was chaste, virtuous and devoted to her husband, only through sacrifice on being immolated by fire. Thus, as a way of getting an inconvenient female out of the way and ensuring control over the female sexuality, *sati* was supremely efficient. By becoming *sati*, a widow not only ended the threat she posed to the spiritual welfare of the family but also reaped honour and merit – according to some religious texts enough to last 35 million years – for herself, her husband, and the families of her husband, her mother, and her father.

Close contact of India with more barbarian races might also have contributed to the growth of the practice of *sati*. For instance, the Scythian influence might have helped the spread of the custom. More obviously, the war phenomenon also contributed to the incidents of *sati*. Fighting was common among the early tribes and the vanquished suffered greatly in warfare. Thus, in those days when sanguinary warfare was a very common phenomenon, there was real danger of conquerors not treating the widows of the

¹⁴⁶. V.N. Datta- *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹⁴⁷. Elizabeth Leigh Stutchbury-*op. cit.*, p. 40.

conquered well. Even Krishna's widows, who followed the robbers voluntarily, later drowned themselves in the Saraswati.¹⁴⁸ It is obvious that they were not happy, for such abductors, as robbers, could not have respect for women. The group suicide of Kaurava widows¹⁴⁹ might also have been due to the insignificant and miserable existence they were possibly dragging on after the death of their husbands. Their places were taken away¹⁵⁰ and they might have been forced to lower their standard of living. But economic difficulty was not all. To this was added the sense of social insignificance facing the widows of the conquered as a stark reality. Thus, when the Kuru and Pandava ladies were introduced to the *rishis*, each Pandava lady, even the widowed Uttara, was separately introduced, but the wives of Kauravas, even the ones of Duryodhana and Dussasana, were introduced collectively in a summary fashion.¹⁵¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that to save them from falling into the clutches of the victors or to escape the state of social marginalization and economic deprivation; women of the conquered preferred to die on the funeral pile. Apprehension of humiliation and servitude made them prefer self-immolation to survival. If the king and his followers were defeated, their womenfolk faced the unwholesome possibility of being subjected to slavery, rape, or slaughter. Suicide in the form of *sati*, and *jauhar* in the medieval period, was a desperate act to avoid that fate even if such act was glorified as the supreme example of both faith and courage. The custom of *sati* and the medieval practice of *jauhar* thus reflected the occupational predicament of the warrior class. Indeed, one of the contributory factors behind the prevalence of *sati* could have been the primitive attitude of possessiveness towards women among the fighting tribes. Fighting races are usually jealous, possessive and apprehensive about their women; rather than leave them behind for the risk of going astray or being subjected to unsavoury treatment at the hands of the victors they would like them to die. For this reason, *sati* was confined, in the initial stage, to the *Rajanya* class - kings and the upper strata of society among the *kshatriyas* for whom the burning of women was a point of honour and a notion tied to the heroic ideal of the *kshatriya* class.

The spread of *sati* across caste boundaries must also have been generated by *Sanskritization* – the process whereby lower castes aspire for higher position by emulating the “customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life” of higher castes. Thus even

¹⁴⁸. *Mahabharata*, XVIII. 5. 25

¹⁴⁹. *Mahabharata*, IX. 31.45; VII. 1. 27

¹⁵⁰. *Mahabharata*, XII. 44. 6

¹⁵¹. *Mahabharata*, XV. 25. 9-16

though the practice may have originated among the families of chiefs and *ksatriyas*, once it was established as a custom associated with the *ksatriyas* it continued to be so among those claiming *ksatriya* status as well. The spread of the custom occurred in areas characterized by internal conquests and competition, often involving newly-emergent castes, and tribal groups. In this setting, competition for status may have made upper caste practices such as *sati* more prevalent. A crucial development in this regard may have been its adoption by *brahmins* who, according to some religious texts, were prohibited from taking up this practice. With the practice rooted in both the kingly and Brahminical tradition, its constituency must have grown rapidly across spatial and social boundaries. Once elevated to new heights as a status conferring ritual, the next step was its practice by lower- artisan and entrepreneurial-castes who saw it as an avenue for attaining prestige and status in society. Thus, *sati* may have become a means for demarcating and emphasizing status. Thus, although the practice was associated with high status and rank during its early history, particularly with families of kingly or warrior (*ksatriya*) status, it was gradually adopted by those aspiring for *ksatriya* status or the lower castes emulating the rituals of higher castes. An interesting feature of the inscriptions from the peninsula, dating from the tenth century A.D. onwards and referring to women becoming *satis* when their husbands died in battles, is that most of them either refer to families of *ksatriya* status or those seeking such a status, including the ones belonging to lower castes and even *sudras*.

In the whole Hindu social and religious life, the *Brahmin* acted as the guide, philosopher and spiritual advisor. In every vital aspect of Hindu social life, birth, death, marriage and religious functions, the *Brahmin* had a very important role to play. He was the sole repository of ancient wisdom and was ordained to interpret the scriptural authority. This made his authority unquestioned in social and religious matters. The *brahmins* realized that *sati* if properly manipulated and managed might become a productive source of employment and therefore they began to represent *sati* as a glorified act and made it a theme for the bards to celebrate.¹⁵² They acted in a subtle manner and cleverly induced the widow to burn herself. Due to the social position of *brahmins* in society and the interpretation of religious literature in favour of *sati*, the rite of *sati* began to gain admiration in public eye as an event of special significance.

¹⁵². V.N. Datta- *op. cit.*, p. 212.

Viewed over time, the justification for widows becoming *satis* moved from the initial explanation that it was the faithful wife following her husband into death to one which included the idea of the *sati* becoming a goddess. In some cases the faithful wife followed her husband irrespective of how he died, as in the case of Madri. Here, the question of honour was not centrally involved as Pandu if anything died an ignoble death, unable to contain his lust for Madri. And Madri gives this as one of the reasons why she should follow her husband into the realms of Yama. Faithfulness in this situation seems theoretical, since both Pandu's wives had conceived sons from various other males, albeit deities, Pandu not being in a position to father a child.

The memorial stones suggest a different situation, where the husband dies a hero's death and the self-immolation of the wife is also memorialised. It is possible that immolation could have been enforced as a requirement to enhance the glory of the hero's death. The question of honour becomes central to the explanation where there is the possible violation of the wife by the enemy. The third situation relates to that of the elimination of a competitor for inheritance where both faithfulness and deification are emphasized. These situations relate to families of the upper castes and of high status and wealth. The act is supported by some persons of the upper castes, condemned by others of the same castes, but prohibited among those whose beliefs and values are said to have prevailed to a larger extent among the lower castes and persons of lesser status. The degree to which the motives conformed to the explanation given or arose from other factors needs to be analysed.

In the present scenario also it has been argued that *sati* involves the question of Rajput honour and is deeply engrained in all Rajputs (in the context of Roop Kunwar's *sati*). It is surely rather dishonourable that a society's honour should be dependent on women having to immolate themselves. The frequency of female infanticide in these areas makes one suspect that it was less a matter of honour and more a matter of other concerns.

It is also quoted as a symbol of an idealised husband-wife relationship. If so, it has an unbalanced manifestation for, as has often been remarked, there is never any question of the husband immolating himself on the pyre of his wife. Nor is the

immolation of the widow invariably voluntary. The widows of Bengal had to be tied to the pyre and kept down by bamboo staffs and there is little certainty that recent acts of immolation were also not enforced.

When it is stated that *sati* is a revival or continuation of a tradition, the particular tradition and the particular social group professing it needs to be ascertained. An attempt is being made to transfer a ritual associated with a small segment of upper caste society to the entire society with the claim that it is a rite of the Hindu community as a whole. It was never regarded as universally applicable to all Hindus and even its limited applicability has always been controversial. Neither among *ksatriyas* nor among *brahmins* was there a universal adherence to the custom. When it was taken up arbitrarily by some members of castes other than the *ksatriyas* it is in the context of demonstrating status or linked to property inheritance.

To argue that the abolition of *sati* is a deliberately anti-Hindu act is to replay the debate of the nineteenth century where Ram Mohan Roy had maintained correctly that it does not carry the sanction of the Vedas and Mrityunjaya Vidyalkar maintained that it was not enjoined by the *shastras*. If status has to be demonstrated today there are other ways of doing it than by burning wives.

The notion of *sati* has moved a long way from questions of honour, the faithfulness of the wife and the deification of the widow. The particular social groups, supporting *sati* have changed over time and this change has had to do with the role, function and rights of women in social relations, property relations and rituals. Some social crisis may have enhanced the ideal of *sati* but significantly this idea was also endorsed by upper castes in situations where those of lesser standing argued for a better status for women. The extension of the symbolism of *sati* from the faithful wife to the goddess was not unrelated to the purposes of the social group endorsing the act. What is being objected to now by many is not merely the act of suicide, or when it is as in most cases enforced, the act of murder, but also the context of the act. This endorses an inconsequential existence for a woman and the subordination of her being to the vulgarity of a public spectacle and to the manipulation of those claiming to be acting in defence of traditional values.

Writers like Bankimchandra Chatterjee - in some sense an ideological progenitor of today's Hindutva ideologues - could evoke the glory of the Hindu *sati* as in this piece of emotive writing:

- When I think of the elevated section of women, the vision that rises upon my mental horizon is that of the sati- the chaste woman- determined to be cremated along with her dead husband. I picture the burning pyre and in the midst of the rising flames, the virtuous lady lovingly holding on to her bosom her husband's feet. Opening out slowly the fire embraces one part of her body and moves towards the other. The fire-gripped lady thinks of her master's feet, and in between exhorts the assemblage of people to chant the name of God. She betrays no trace of physical pain. Her face is joyous. Gradually the sacred flame flies up, life is behind, and the body reduced to ashes. Blessed is her tolerance! Blessed is her love! Blessed her devotion!

When I think that just a few days ago the delicate women of my country could court death in this fashion, a new hope runs through my mind. I am convinced that the seeds of greatness are inherent in us. Shall we not be able to witness this greatness tomorrow?

The *sati* remains the essence of Hindu womanhood even as its practice has been banned since 1829.

5.11 PRESENT SCENARIO

If we were to evaluate *satis* in the present context, it may be said that what is of significance today is not just the incidence of widows becoming *satis* but the attempt to justify a custom at a particular historical juncture. The justification involves more than merely a custom, for it also symbolizes an attitude towards women as well as a view of what is regarded as 'tradition'. Often ideological indoctrination led well-meaning men and women to believe in the moral and spiritual transformative power of *sati*. What is worse than the act of *sati* itself is the public flaunting of the event and the 'religious'

hysteria and frenzy that was unleashed. The religious sanction accorded to an inhuman and barbaric act is a matter of shame and disgrace.

We cannot reverse the damage done. But we can and must collectively raise our voices-not just to condemn the act itself but, and more important, to oppose the patriarchal ideology on which the act of *sati* is based: namely the, the view of woman and widowhood so widely prevalent in Indian - largely Hindu- culture and society. The social roots of *sati* are to be found in the helpless condition of the Hindu widows; and in avoiding the social responsibility of rehabilitating them in family and society. Women should not treat their married life as the only goal in life. All talk of education and equality for women in India is meaningless if we continue to support the belief that woman in this society can exist with honour only under the protection of some male- be it father, husband, brother or son and that she has no identity or life of her own. There can be no greater indictment of a society than the way women still continue to be treated as inferior beings. After 60 years of Independence, and liberal constitutional pledges notwithstanding, the status of women has not improved to the desired extent, and a patriarchal value system remains the norm.

The widow burning incidents remains a burning reminder of our apathy towards the social status of women. We, the women and men of India should unequivocally condemn the act of *sati*, and state publicly that such brutal tradition and customs have no place in Hinduism or in any other religion. The time has come now to shed the old patriarchal values and norms. All necessary steps should be taken by the government and us to abolish this cruel custom. The economic dependence of women should be reduced, they should be trained to work and helped to stand on their own, instead of being dependent on their fathers, husbands and sons at different stages of life. Economic self-reliance will help in building self- confidence in widows.

As one can see, the controversy of *sati* is very complex. Despite the existence of laws which prohibit in India, these laws have not hindered some attempts by women to perform the selfless act. For instance, in 1997, police in Northern India prevented a widow from committing *sati*. These occurrences confirm that deeply held and deeply cherished norms cannot be changed simply by enacting laws; they cannot change the prevalent customs, superstitions or social taboos. It should be remembered that women in

India suffer from all these three social drawbacks. All the progressive social legislations passed to improve the status of women have proved to be of little help in the context of actual social norms, customs and beliefs. The need of the hour is that along with the necessary legislation to stop the barbaric practices against women, and to tone up the forces of enforcement to implement the law, we need a massive social movement of women to fight against the widespread oppression they are subjected to in our villages. In the absence of mobilization of women themselves on this score, a substantial change in the present social structure and organisation is not possible. Social change among the Indian women is going to require a genuine dialogue on why women have been culturally conditioned to consider their own lives worthless after the death of their husbands. In essence, it is the ingrained cultural (patriarchal) traditions the Indian people must change. It will take time to change centuries old patriarchal norms and ideals. Reversing years or centuries of female oppression is not only a challenge for Indian women but for women on a global scale.

If then, a discussion of the present kind has any meaning; it is a wake-up call to the wife bound to the stake of an imposed ideology. Political action by Indian feminists to protect putative *satis* is obviously necessary, but the limited value of imposing a solution from above can be greatly strengthened if the ideals that enslave women at risk can be exploded and the women themselves armed for resistance. Helping the victim achieve autonomy is a necessary condition of enduring empowerment, and, because power does come to a large degree through knowledge, finding and affirming that knowledge is the least an academic can do. Ultimately a social order has to be evolved where a widow feels herself safe and secure and finds her life worth living.
